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Strategies for Improving First-Line Supervisor Problem-Solving Abilities in the Retail Supermarket Industry

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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John Jarvis

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Walden University
2016

Abstract

Strategies for Improving First-Line Supervisor Problem-Solving Abilities in the Retail

Supermarket Industry

by

John Edward Jarvis

MS, High Point University, 2000

BA, Marshall University, 1991

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

December 2016

Abstract

First-line supervisors in U.S. retail organizations are unable to resolve nearly 34% of typical daily customer problems for their organizations. The purpose of this single case study was to explore the strategies retail supermarket managers have used to improve 1st line supervisor problem solving abilities within a retail supermarket company in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The conceptual framework for this study was the skills-based leadership model. Data were collected from semistructured interviews with 4 retail store manager participants with a successful record of improving first-line supervisor problem solving abilities. Additionally, the review of company documents including training guides, training checklists, job descriptions, annual goal setting templates, and company website postings supplemented the semistructured interviews. Data analysis entailed coding, conceptualizing concepts and ideas, identifying themes, and member-checking to ensure the trustworthiness of interpretations. Based on the methodological triangulation of the data collected, 4 themes emerged after the data analysis: (a) the importance of communicating expectations with first-line supervisors, (b) coaching first-line supervisors on performance, (c) first-line supervisor learning and development, and (d) measuring first-line supervisor performance. Findings from this study may contribute to social change by providing insights and strategies that retail store managers can use to improve 1st-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. Improvement in problem-solving abilities may improve employees' lives, communities, and organizational performance.

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Dedication

I dedicate this project to my family, who tolerated me and whose support and encouragement made life bearable and completion of this study possible.

Acknowledgements

I thank Jesus Christ for His saving grace and for providing the resources that allowed me to complete this doctoral study. I want to thank my committee chair, Dr. Irene Williams for her steadfast guidance, mentoring, and commitment to helping me successfully complete my doctoral journey. I also wish to thank committee members Dr. Annie Brown, my second committee member, and Dr. James Savard, university research reviewer (URR), for their sage advice, guidance, and support. A special acknowledgement goes to faculty, staff, and fellow students at Walden who inspired me to stay focused on completing my doctoral program and study. Lastly, I wish to acknowledge my librarian mother, Marilyn Jarvis, and her coworkers who first introduced me to research methods during those afternoons when I was “stuck” hanging around the public library after school. Thanks, Mom!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

U.S. retail store managers are typically responsible for providing customers with quality service and memorable shopping experiences (Zairis, 2013). Retail store managers are required to meet organizational goals and effectively supervise their assigned team (Zairis). Retail store managers must also provide customers with a positive shopping experience to increase customer satisfaction in order to facilitate customer loyalty and repeat shopping intentions, ultimately increasing store financial performance (Bagdare, 2013). Customer satisfaction intensifies the relationship between a customer and an organization and is a requisite condition for customer loyalty (Kaura, Durga Prasad, & Sharma, 2015).

Frontline retail employees deliver managers' intended service practices and influence customer satisfaction and perceptions of quality (Jha, 2013). First-line supervisors manage the frontline delivery of customer service and must possess the ability to handle multiple accountabilities and resolve organization and leadership problems (Lloyd & Payne, 2014). Ha, Akamavi, Kitchen, and Janda (2014) suggested poor supermarket customer experience might lead to customer dissatisfaction.

Background of the Problem

The U. S. retail supermarket industry is increasingly competitive. Retail store managers rely on first-line supervisors and frontline employees to deliver quality service to satisfy customers in an effort to create quality customer experiences and loyalty (Jha, 2013). Customer loyalty is an outgrowth of customer satisfaction and is critical to conducting business in a competitive and unpredictable marketplace (Komunda &

Osarenkhoe, 2012). A major challenge encountered by retail supermarket managers is the need to collaborate with first-line supervisors to achieve customer satisfaction; however, first-line supervisors sometimes lack skills and adequate training for this task (Townsend, 2013). Bloom, Genakos, Sadun, and Van Reenen (2012) and Martinelli and Balboni (2012) suggested a positive relationship between management quality and organizational performance.

Osarenkhoe and Komunda (2013) emphasized the importance of management effectiveness in resolving customer complaints, and ensuring employee effectiveness had a direct influence on customer satisfaction and loyalty constructs. Lloyd and Payne (2014) described the influence of managerial effectiveness as being affected by a dichotomy in some supervisory roles where the supervisor functions as both a customer-facing worker, as well as a supervisor to other employees. Conversely, Bloom et al. (2012) suggested deficiencies in extant literature related to causality and patterns of managerial behavior, and skills, affecting organizational performance results. It is therefore critical to gain understanding of how retail store managers improve first-line supervisor skills to achieve customer satisfaction.

Problem Statement

First-line supervisors in retail organizations are unable to resolve nearly 34% of typical daily customer problems effectively for their organizations (Osarenkhoe & Komunda, 2013). According to representatives of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, organizations had more than 1.1 million first-line supervisors whose ineffectiveness negatively influences customer complaint recovery, affect customer satisfaction, and

directly contribute to organizational performance (Martinelli & Balboni, 2012; Osarenkhoe & Komunda, 2013). The general business problem is retail supermarket industry first-line supervisors have insufficient abilities to reduce daily customer problems, which negatively affect retail managers' ability to maintain customer satisfaction. The specific business problem is some retail supermarket managers lack strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem solving abilities.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies that some retail supermarket store managers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina used to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities. The population for this study was four retail supermarket store managers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina who had implemented strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. The implications for positive social change included enhancing flexible and effective workplaces through improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. Improved first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities can improve organizational performance that enables organizations to contribute positively to their communities by reducing workforce-workplace mismatch and improving employees' lives and well-being.

Nature of the Study

I chose a qualitative methodology for this study. Qualitative studies are conducted to explore and understand phenomena (Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman, 2015), and to describe the multidimensionality of the study topic and to provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon from the perspective of the individuals involved (Yilmaz, 2013). A

qualitative research methodology was appropriate for studying strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. A quantitative research method is more suitable for a study with a focus on reducing phenomena to numerical variables (Yilmaz, 2013), which was not the case in this study. Mixed methods research incorporates elements of qualitative and quantitative approaches and is suited to synthesize inductive and deductive data analyses (Raich, Müller, & Abfalter, 2014), which was also not the case in this study. Therefore, quantitative and mixed method approaches were not appropriate for this study.

A case study research design provides the opportunity to explore strategies used by participants to improve first-line supervisors' problem-solving abilities. A case study research design is suitable to examine a current and complex, real-life phenomenon, or bounded system, and employs multiple data collection sources to develop an extensive depiction and analysis of the case (Yin, 2014). In contrast, ethnographic qualitative designs focus on immersive data collection over a protracted period, while a qualitative phenomenological design focus is on lived experiences of participants without regard for time or boundaries (Gill, 2014), neither of which were desirable for this study. A qualitative narrative design focus is on the personal biographical experiences of participants without regard for time or boundaries (Gill, 2014), which also did not apply. The research aim of this study was to explore and understand strategies used by retail store managers to improve first line supervisor problem solving abilities within the context of the case organization; ethnography, phenomenology, and narrative designs were therefore not appropriate.

Research Question

The central research question used to guide this study was: What strategies do retail supermarket managers use to improve first-line supervisors' problem solving abilities?

Interview Questions

The interview questions to aid and guide the research investigation were:

1. What strategies have you utilized to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities related to customer satisfaction?
2. How did you implement the strategies?
3. What barriers did you have to address in implementing the strategies?
4. How did you address the barriers to implementing the strategies?
5. How do you measure the strategies' efficacy (or effectiveness)?
6. Please share additional information related to strategies store managers use to improve first line supervisor problem-solving skills that will add value to this study?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in this qualitative study was the skills-based leadership model developed by Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, and Fleishman (2000).

Mumford et al. (2000) suggested that leadership is a type of skilled performance. I used the skills-based leadership model in this study as an explanation for strategies employed to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. Key constructs underlying the skills-based leadership model include (a) problem-solving skills, (b) social judgment and

social skills, and (c) knowledge (Mumford et al., 2000). Mumford et al. asserted that each skill set is associated with various forms of knowledge and skills and knowledge grow as a function of experience as leaders progress through their careers. Bauer, Schmitt, Morwitz, and Winer (2013) asserted supervisors influence customer satisfaction, and improving supervisors' decision making might be valuable to facilitating beneficial customer acquisition and retention decisions. As applied to this study, the propositions advanced by employing the skills-based leadership model enabled participants to explore strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem solving abilities as they pertain to customer satisfaction.

Operational Definitions

Customer satisfaction: The outcome of a customer's reaction to experience in comparison with expectations with a service provider (Esbjerg et al., 2012).

Employee involvement (EI): A work-design approach for work systems that emphasize high levels of employee autonomy and decision-making (Benson, Kimmel, & Lawler III, 2013).

First-line supervisor: An individual who has supervisory responsibilities for employees closest to the operating core in an organization (Townsend & Russell, 2013).

Learning agility: A multi-competency, integrative, and experiential learning model (De Meuse, Dai, Swisher, Eichinger, & Lombardo, 2012).

Servicescape: A service context for commercial exchanges in which visitors respond holistically to an environmental service system (Dong, & Siu, 2013).

Skills-based leadership model: A leadership approach that identified personal attributes and competencies needed to solve organizational leadership problems to achieve performance outcomes (Mumford et al., 2000; Northouse, 2013).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are a researcher's beliefs that underpin and define a research investigation (Kirkwood & Price, 2013). I made three assumptions in this study. First, I assumed that participants in this study possessed knowledge and experiences about first-line supervisor problem solving abilities and that they were willing to share their views and perceptions openly. Second, because I collected data in this study through in-person interviews, I assumed that participants were sufficiently proficient in expressing themselves in speaking and understanding English. A third assumption was the population of retail store managers was appropriate for exploring strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem solving abilities. Therefore, I assumed that the participants selected to participate provided accurate information about their experiences.

Limitations

Limitations describe what the reader can and cannot conclude from the findings of a research study based on potential weaknesses of the research method employed (Denscombe, 2013). This qualitative study was limited to a purposeful sample of four retail store managers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The first limitation was the possibility of not finding four retail store managers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina to participate in the study. The second limitation was the possibility of not obtaining consent

of participants to participate in the study. The third limitation was the single case study research design of this study, which limited the transferability of the findings.

Delimitations

Delimitations describe established boundaries of the research study (Denscombe, 2013). The population and sample for this study were delimited to four retail store managers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina who were 18 years of age or older and who had supervised first-line supervisors for at least two years. The scope of the study included identifying strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

Retail supermarket store managers seek to maximize customer satisfaction through improving first-line supervisors' problem solving abilities to improve organizational effectiveness and maximize profitability within their organizations. High service quality may lead to perceived value by customers, which in turn influences customer satisfaction, and subsequently, customer loyalty (Thenmozhi, 2014). Osarenkhoe and Komunda (2013) asserted management effectiveness in resolving customer complaints, as well as ensuring employee effectiveness had direct influence on customer satisfaction and loyalty constructs. Role dichotomy in some supervisory roles where the supervisor functions as both a customer-facing worker, as well as a supervisor to other employees might affect managerial effectiveness (Lloyd & Payne, 2014). The findings from this study provide a conceptual model that relates to business practice associated with applying the skills-based leadership strategies store managers may use to

improve problem-solving abilities of first-line supervisors. Retail supermarket managers should use this conceptual model to aid in improving customer satisfaction and organizational effectiveness.

Implications for Social Change

This study was designed to contribute to positive social change by helping retail store managers determine strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities to enhance employee well-being through effective and flexible workplaces. Effective and flexible workplaces improve employee and family well-being, and address community and societal issues associated with workforce-workplace mismatch while improving employer outcomes (Galinsky, Matos, & Sakai-O'Neill, 2013). Sharma and Good (2013) asserted that management training and development programs improve first-line supervisor capabilities associated with balancing social initiatives and profitability goals. Additionally, Hong, Liao, Hu, and Jiang (2013) concluded management training and development programs might improve first-line supervisor skills associated with service orientation. Improved first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities may enable first-line supervisors to implement social change initiatives, such as workplace flexibility, that improve employees' lives, positively impact communities, and improve organizational performance.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this literature review was to provide context and validation for the exploration of the central research question, "What strategies can retail supermarket managers use to improve first-line supervisors' problem solving abilities?"

Retail supermarket managers rely on first-line supervisors to achieve desired strategy execution, customer service and satisfaction, employee development and performance, operational delivery, and store performance (Townsend, Loudoun, & Troth, 2016). The first-line supervisor role is complex, dichotomous, and works closest to the operating core of the organization with responsibilities for supervision for customer-facing employees (Townsend & Russell, 2013). First-line supervisors face myriad pressures including managing human resources policies, managing budgets, staff development and communication, people management, and customer interaction (Townsend & Russell, 2013). However, in some respects the development of the first-line supervisor role is not adequate to achieve desired goals (Townsend, 2013).

Literature compiled for the review includes peer-reviewed and other scholarly journal articles, published dissertations, books, and government documents. Databases used to locate peer-reviewed articles published after 2011 include ABI/INFORM, Academic Search Complete/Premier, Business SourceComplete, EBSCOhost, Emerald Management Journals, ProQuest Central, Sage Journals, ScienceDirect, Thoreau, Dissertation, and Theses at Walden University, and Google Scholar. The U S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S. Department of Health & Human Services websites served as the sources for the identified government references. Table 1 contains a list of peer-reviewed journals, dissertations, books, and nonpeer reviewed journals referenced in the literature review. This literature review contains 168 unique sources; 160 of the articles had publication dates inclusive of 2012 to 2016.

Table 1

Literature Review Source Content

Reference Type	Total	<5 years	>5 years	% Total <5 years old
Peer-reviewed journals	154	149	5	96.8%
Dissertations	3	3	0	100%
Books	8	6	2	75%
Nonpeer reviewed journals	3	2	1	66.7%
Total	168	160	8	95.2%

The review of the literature begins with a description of the conceptual framework for the study and reasons it was appropriate, as well as strengths, limitations, weaknesses of other theories. The literature review next includes a discussion of elements of organizational and leadership problems typical for first-line supervisors. The review content includes descriptions of customer satisfaction and organizational performance relevant for this study. The review also includes discussion of the underlying causes that influenced a lack of managerial strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. The literature review concludes with a discussion of the rationale and potential impact of the study.

Skills-Based Leadership Model

The conceptual framework for this research was based on the skills-based leadership model. Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, and Fleishman (2000) developed the skills-based leadership model, which states that leadership is a type of skilled

performance. Mumford et al. (2000) asserted that each skill is a capability associated with various forms of knowledge, and skills and knowledge grow as a function of experience as leaders progress through their careers. This aligned with Katz's (1955) conclusion that effective leadership/administration depends on the skills of the administrator/leader. Powers (2014) also identified leadership as a skill a manager may need at various points in the management process. The leadership skills model is skill-centered versus leader-centered (Mumford et al., 2000). Figure 1 shows the components of the skills-based leadership model.

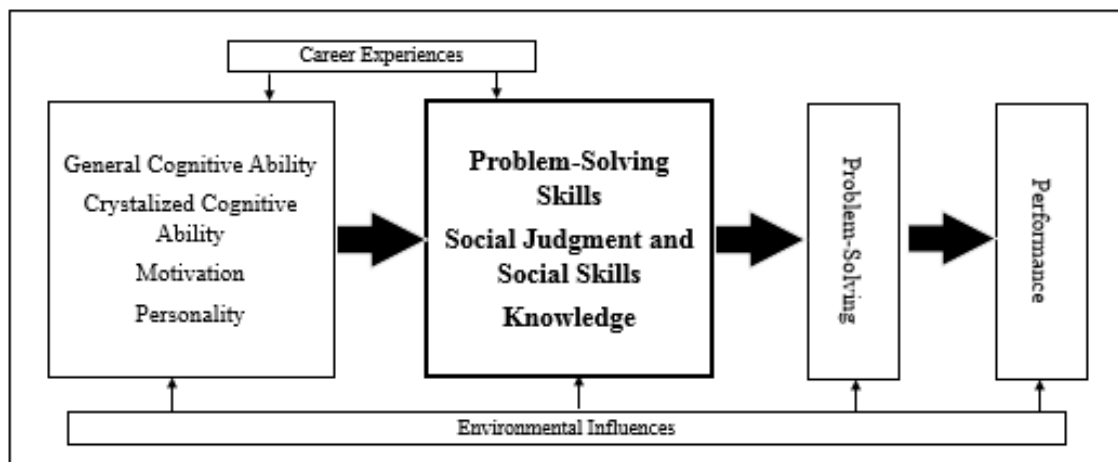


Figure 1. Components of the skills-based leadership model. Adapted from *Leadership Quarterly*, 11(1), M. D. Mumford, S. J. Zaccaro, F. D. Harding, T. O. Jacobs, and E. A. Fleishman, "Leadership skills for a changing world: Solving complex social problems," p. 23, Copyright (2000), with permission from Elsevier.

Senior retail leaders and store managers should seek to understand how first-line supervisors develop leadership skills and knowledge. Powers (2014) suggested managers acquire knowledge and skills, including leadership skills, through a combination of career and life experiences, development programs and experience in the current organization.

Furthermore, learned skills are important for effective leadership by first-line managers (Petkevičiūtė & Giedraitis, 2013). Organizations should therefore develop first-line supervisor capabilities, or competencies, to assure effective frontline execution of business goals.

Leadership skills are a set of capabilities that first-line supervisors can employ to resolve leadership and organizational problems. Leadership and management skills and knowledge are critical to developing organizational innovation competencies, as well as broader organizational capabilities (Kivipõld, 2015). Key constructs underlying the skills-based leadership model include (a) individual attributes, (b) competencies, and (c) leadership outcomes (Mumford et al., 2000; Northouse, 2013). The literature search for this study showed a gap in the literature, with few case studies specifically examining how to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. However, results from a single-case study conducted within a Finnish department store showed the importance of effective first-line supervisor skills including daily contact (communication) between supervisors and subordinates, as well as the importance of daily feedback (Janhonen & Lindström, 2015).

Individual attributes. Successful leaders must possess certain traits that enable development of key skills and abilities. Individual attributes of the skills-based leadership model include (a) general cognitive ability, (b) crystalized cognitive ability, (c) motivation, and (d) personality (Mumford et al., 2000). For instance, Mumford, Watts, and Partlow (2015) asserted leaders should possess necessary cognitive capacities to apply leadership skills in solving organizational problems. Furthermore, possessing traits

associated with intellectual, perceptual, and reasoning abilities appear to contribute to a leader's attainment of problem-solving and social judgment skills (Germain, 2012). Traits inform skill building associated with expertise, including problem solving.

Some attributes of expertise are intrinsic and considered unteachable; however, skills such as problem solving, social judgment, and knowledge can be acquired by the learner through training (Germain, 2012). Individual leader attributes such as motivation orientation also aid in explaining leadership effectiveness (Zaccaro, 2012). Dinh and Lord (2012) suggested that a leader's personality might influence how the leader responds to situations. However, Dinh and Lord (2012) indicated leadership skills and learned behaviors mediate a leader's traits. Kalargyrou, Pescosolido, and Kalargiros (2012) stated that the skills-based leadership model identifies traits as important attributes of skill development and leader performance outcomes; however, traits are secondary in importance to competencies.

Competencies. Competencies include knowledge, skills, and abilities an organization deems critical for performance. Kaplan and Norton (2004) proposed competencies included skills and knowledge needed to execute internal processes that support an organization's strategy. For example, Yu and Ramanathan (2013) found employee competencies significantly affected achievement of operations strategy and cost reductions in a retail environment. Similarly, Kivipõld (2015) identified effective leadership competencies as critical to gaining competitive advantage. For example, Trivellas and Reklitis (2014) sampled 132 managers in Greek companies and found that managerial effectiveness was positively associated with core competencies, including

decision making, conflict management, and communication. Organizations should therefore identify leadership competencies to achieve superior performance.

Leadership competency profiles might form the basis of leadership development. Northouse (2013) asserted leadership competencies were key factors for effective leadership performance. Furthermore, Day, Fleener, Atwater, Sturm, and McKee (2014) suggested leader skill development is dependent on experiential learning that occurs as an individual interacts with the organizational environment. In sum, the skills-based leadership model includes three competencies (a) problem-solving skills, (b) social judgment and social skills, and (c) knowledge (Mumford et al., 2000).

Problem-solving skills. Problem-solving capabilities are critical skills for organizational leaders. Within the skills-based leadership model, Mumford et al. (2000) identified problem-solving skills as the capacity to solve ill-defined and unique problems germane to organizational leadership roles. Likewise, Nazem, Mozaiini, and Seifi (2014) asserted that nonroutine problem resolution requires creative thinking and problem-solving capabilities. Furthermore, leadership problem-solving skills include: (a) defining problems, (b) gather problem-related information, (c) ability to formulate new insights about the problem, and (d) generate solution options, or alternatives, for problems (Northouse, 2013). Additionally, leadership problem-solving skills enable leaders to address problems with solutions to position the organization to accomplish desired goals (Longenecker & Yonker, 2013b). The ability to solve problems requires skill development by leaders.

Organizations should include problem-solving skill development in leader competency development. Nazem et al. (2014) noted creative problem-solving skill development is critical and elements include preparation, establishment, illumination, and confirmation. Moreover, Mumford et al. (2000) asserted creative problem-solving skills influenced leader performance. Longenecker and Yonker (2013b) suggested problem solving associated with organizational change requires effectual decision-making. Organizational problems might be routine, or unique, and may require adaptability and change leadership by first-line supervisors and other organizational leaders. Nazem et al. (2014) further indicated social skills might enhance problem-solving abilities.

Social judgment and social skills. People skills are critical for leaders in organizations to solve organizational problems and gain competitive advantage through people. First-line supervisor problem-solving skills require development of social complexity capability to differentiate personal and relational aspects of social situations to enhance understanding and integrate into effective alternatives and solutions (De Meuse, Dai, Swisher, Eichinger, & Lombardo, 2012). Leaders implement effective organizational problem solutions within a social context (Mumford et al., 2000). Mumford et al. further suggested leaders must possess social performance skills, including communication, persuasion, negotiation, conflict management, and coaching.

Retail managers should seek to understand the significance of first-line supervisors' communication skills to organizational outcomes. Steele and Plenty (2015) contended that communication competence is critical for leaders. Steele and Plenty (2015) further suggested leaders utilize communication to accomplish desired goals,

provide direction to achieve organizational goals, and create a favorable viewpoint in subordinates. Teague and Roche (2012) found first-line supervisor engagement in workplace conflict management and resolution required formal training and ongoing skill assessment to ensure higher positive employee relations climate. Germain (2012) asserted leaders should be alert to social environment of the organization, as well as be socially skilled. Kivipõld (2015) indicated advanced organizational leadership social capability permits organizations to implement specific management activities for social outcomes and the coordination of knowledge to generate innovative behaviors. Retail managers should therefore ensure first-line supervisors develop needed communication skills.

Knowledge. Customers, employees, and managers often view first-line supervisors as subject-matter experts for their assigned areas of responsibility. Swanson and Kent (2014) concluded that a leader's perceived level of expertise and knowledge by other organizational members was a critical aspect in the leadership process. Petkevičiūtė and Giedraitis (2013) posited that first-line supervisors were more effective when personal expertise aligns with skills and knowledge of the first-line supervisor's workgroup. This suggests that acquisition of experiential expertise is critical for leaders.

Knowledge acquired through experience and experiential learning is critical in how leaders define problems, evaluate constraints, and implement plans (Mumford et al., 2000). Knowledge structures including knowledge of problem states, knowledge of organization, and knowledge of people support cognitive processes leaders employ when solving organizational problems (Zaccaro, 2012). Knowledge is the cache of conceptual frameworks, including experiences, and information utilized to apply and implement

leader problem-solving skills (Northouse, 2013). Additionally, Kivipõld (2015) asserted leadership knowledge and skills enable coordination as a necessary means to develop organizational capabilities. In sum, how a leader dynamically interacts with the organizational environment in developing and applying necessary problem-solving skills is key in understanding leader performance (Mumford et al., 2000).

Leadership outcomes. First-line supervisors are responsible for executing organizational strategies and goals. Bloom et al. (2012) indicated effective management performance and practices could positively improve organizational performance. Furthermore, Bauer et al. (2013) concluded managers face a variety of complex problems in their daily duties and decision-making. Additionally, effective management practices might include setting and executing goals, planning and scheduling activities, and developing subordinates (Preenen, van Vianen, & de Pater, 2014). Bauer et al. (2013) indicated more experienced leaders tend to use reasoning and intuition simultaneously in decision making related to problem solving. To understand the effect of leader outcomes on organizational performance, it is necessary to analyze leadership at the event-level.

First-line supervisors interact with stakeholders and assigned duties through a series of interactions. Event-focused measurement might help organizations understand the time and place influences of leader outcomes on individual, group, and organizational performance (Hoffman & Lord, 2013). Dinh and Lord (2012) suggested the importance of analyzing leadership at an event-level might aid in understanding how leaders develop personal identity and acquire leadership skills. Hoffman and Lord (2013) further suggested as leadership skills develop responses to unique events might become ordinary

and potentially routine. A leader must adjust to a wide spectrum of tasks and social circumstances that influence the leader's perception and performance due to changing intrapersonal processes (Dinh & Lord, 2012). Consequently, Dinh and Lord (2012) indicated a leader's developmental growth might change at an elemental level by experiencing significant leadership events. Because leaders must adjust to constant changes in the competitive environment, enabling ongoing learning and adaptability are crucial leadership outcomes.

Continuous learning and the ability to make course corrections are important aspects for organizational leaders to achieve competitive advantage in the marketplace. De Meuse et al. (2012) described learning and doing as being inseparable, and leaders' learning activities emerged in response to lessons created by dealing with critical incidents that might include uncertain outcomes, consequences of actions, meaningful opportunities, and problems. Likewise, leaders must assure they embolden employees to develop skills for change, as well as create an organizational structure to sustain an effective organizational culture (Onatolu, 2013). Furthermore, change management skills and processes might provide elements of continuous improvement, learning and systemic reform (Neuman, 2012). In addition, an effective change management process prepares the organization for sustainability and organizational stability (Neuman, 2012). Change and adaptability are crucial as is the ability to provide conflict leadership.

Conflict leadership and management is a critical leadership outcome. Conflict is present in all organizations and may influence employee engagement (Soieb, Othman, & D'Silva, 2013). Shetach (2012) noted successful management involves extracting and

maximizing the potential essence of conflict situations, related communications processes, and negotiations. However, Saundry, Jones, and Wibberley (2015) indicated many frontline managers are not adequately prepared to handle dispute and conflict resolution. To influence conflict management leaders should create a persistent flow of information between organizational actors and stakeholders and the need for expanded conversation and dialogue between internal and external stakeholders (Rai, Keil, Hornyak, & Wullenweber, 2012). The nature of organizational conflict leadership, change management, and understanding leadership execution at the event-level underscore the situational nature of leadership.

The retail environment is dynamic and creates the need for leaders to utilize differing leadership techniques based on the situation. Stincelli and Baghurst (2014) suggested leadership was situational. Furthermore, stakeholder conceptions of leader effectiveness might differ based on circumstances and the situation (Gilbert, Myrtle, & Sohi, 2014). Additionally, Tang, Liu, Oh, and Weitz (2014) noted retail organizations should employ management training in situational leadership techniques to address differing socialization needs of subordinates. In addition to situational leadership techniques, leaders should create a positive environment to achieve leadership outcomes.

Leaders might achieve desired outcomes by creating a collaborative environment for subordinates. Stincelli and Baghurst (2014) indicated that influence and collaboration, as well as commitment to shared values and goals were determinants of both perceptions of informal leadership and perceptions of effective formal leadership. Furthermore, leaders should create an inclusive culture in a workgroup to provide benefits related to

improved communication, improved problem solving, and team cohesion (Scott, Heathcote, & Gruman, 2011). Additionally, Nienaber and Svensson (2013) indicated the importance of involving employees in a bottoms-up approach to organizational performance results. Next, it is a critical comparison of the skills-based leadership model with other leadership models.

Other leadership models. The skills-based leadership model focuses on attributes, competencies, and outcomes of leaders centered on skills leaders use to solve organizational problems. However, leadership theory includes a wide variety of perspectives on the definition of leadership, as well as the essence of leadership constructs (DeChurch, Hiller, Murase, Doty, & Salas, 2010; Unsar & Karalar, 2013). Considering skills-based leadership from a model perspective, Kalargyrou et al. (2012) identified inclusion of traits in the skills-based model as a potential weakness, and thus, not a pure skills model. Furthermore, Kalargyrou et al. (2012) further suggested potential limited generalizability as another potential weakness because the studies focused solely on military personnel. Conversely, Mumford et al. (2000) contended that the skills-based model might help explain precepts of transformational leadership, style, LMX and others by identifying and linking underlying skills associated with application of those models. Skills-based leadership model was compared with trait, transactional, transformational, leader-manager exchange (LMX) approaches, and the emergent leadership construct of shared leadership, as these models are most-often linked to individual-leader outcomes (DeChurch et al., 2010).

Trait theory incorporates traits, or personality, as a determinant of the individual's capabilities as a leader. Chai (2015) indicated leadership trait theory might explain how a leader's personal characteristics contribute to effective leadership. Leader personality traits influence how a leader interacts with subordinates, as well as might influence organizational performance (Bolton, Brunnermeier, & Veldkamp, 2013). Conversely, a criticism of the skills-based leadership model was the inclusion of individual attributes, or traits, thus because it includes traits it is not a pure skills model (Kalargyrou et al., 2012). Trait leadership focuses on elements of personality and personal attributes, which contrasts from transactional leadership that focuses on leader-subordinate reward exchanges.

Leaders employing transactional leadership techniques utilize a set of reward and corrective factors to influence subordinate performance. Transactional leadership is grounded in leader-follower quid pro quo behaviors with rewards that are dependent on performance (Northouse, 2013; Yee, Lee, Yeung, & Cheng, 2013). Likewise, transactional leadership might be effective in focusing employee efforts on task completion that facilitates obtaining rewards from their organization (Yee et al., 2013). Similar to skills-based leadership elements, Whittington, Coker, Goodwin, Ickes, and Murray (2009) concluded leaders who had insufficient transactional leadership skills might negatively affect employee effectiveness. Furthermore, Janhonen and Lindström (2015) suggested inadequate transactional leadership skills negatively affect team goal attainment. Gilbert et al. (2014) further asserted transformational and transactional

leadership approaches are similar leader behaviors utilized to influence employee behavior.

Transformational leadership is a leader behavior-focused leadership approach. Northouse (2013) noted transformational leadership is a multifaceted leader-focused approach utilized by leaders to empower and engage followers in the initiation, development, and deployment of significant change in organizations. Furthermore, transformational leadership focuses on increasing intrinsic engagement to induce higher employee commitment (Gilbert et al., 2014). However, Northouse (2013) asserted several criticisms of transformational leadership including a lack of conceptual clarity in defining it, how to measure it, that it is treated as a trait, and it might be misused in organizations. Effelsberg, Solga, and Gurt (2014) asserted transformational leadership may produce unintended pro-organizational yet unethical characteristics from employees based on loyalty. Effelsberg et al. (2014) further indicated a positive relationship between transformational leadership and follower willingness to engage in unethical behavior to benefit the organization. Conversely, Northouse (2013) suggested transformational leadership requires leaders to be self-aware of how their personal behavior relates to, and affects the needs of followers. In comparison with the skills-based leadership model, Kalargyrou et al. (2012) asserted motivating subordinates, influencing others, and communicating vision of the organization are interpersonal skills focused on interacting with and influencing stakeholders. Leaders utilizing transformational leadership exercise personal power and inspiring followers, which contrasts with style approach and leader-member exchange.

The central focus of style leadership approach is how a leader blends tasks and relationship behaviors to influence subordinates. Northouse (2013) indicated leadership style research as indicating task and relationship behavior types as pivotal. Northouse (2013) further suggested success as a leader may have been dependent on how a leader effectually demonstrated each behavior. Furthermore, Gilbert et al. (2014) asserted that leader styles may be situational based on the setting, and that conceptions of leader effectiveness might differ based on circumstances. Conversely, leader-member exchange theory (LMX) conceived leadership through leader-follower interactions in the context of in-groups and out-groups, empowerment, and leader-making (Northouse, 2013). Additionally, LMX may raise performance expectations that exceed personal capabilities for both leader and follower due to perceived higher levels of responsibility associated with mutual trust and respect (Jha & Jha, 2013). Style leadership approach and LMX differ from skills-based leadership model as those theories focus on leader behaviors and leader-follower interactions, respectively, versus skills a leader utilizes. Style leadership approach is leader centric, LMX focuses on leader and subordinate interactions, while distributed leadership focuses on members of a work group.

Given the evolving first-line supervisor role and the influence of employee involvement initiatives, it is critical to consider aspects of shared or distributed leadership. Dinh and Lord (2012) described shared, or distributed, leadership as an emergent leadership prototype in which leadership occurs at the group-level. Dinh and Lord (2012) further noted distributed leadership occurs where an individual informally assumes, or a group formally grants an individual, leadership responsibility within a

particular context. Employee involvement (EI) schemes emphasize high levels of employee autonomy and decision-making (Benson, Kimmel, & Lawler III, 2014). In comparison with skills-based leadership, emergent leadership environments might require leader cognitive skills that enable simplifying problems for followers (Mumford et al., 2015). Understanding aspects of the skills-based leadership model is critical to the discussion of strategies retail store managers utilize to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. Next, I will review literature pertaining to organizational and leadership problems typically handled by first-line supervisors.

Organizational and Leadership Problems Handled by First-Line Supervisors

Strategy implementation. Frontline employees execute retail supermarket strategy. Strategy implementation is a critical role for first-line supervisors (Townsend, 2013). First-line supervisor strategy implementation requires ensuring adequate planning, prioritization, employee alignment, and engagement, skill development of assigned resources, as well as monitoring (Townsend, 2013). Moreover, organizations should ensure first-line managers possess the abilities, motivation, and opportunity to implement strategic initiatives (Firoz & Chowdhury, 2013). Additionally, Nasir, Abbas, and Zafar (2014) suggested that because of increasingly dynamic environments, organizations might need to implement changes in strategy, structure, process, and culture. Effective strategy implementation requires that first-line supervisors properly execute market policies.

Executing market policies. To execute market policies, first-line supervisors must ensure frontline employee alignment and understanding of marketing strategies and

policies. Boukis, Kaminakis, Siampos, and Kostopoulos (2015) concluded internal marketing (IM) positively contributes to more effective implementation of organizational external marketing strategies, as well as motivates and leverages discretionary efforts demonstrated by individual frontline employees. IM orientation significantly contributes to customer satisfaction (Kaur Sahi, Lonial, Gupta, & Seli, 2013). Additionally, a supervisor's adoption of IM might yield higher employee responsiveness in service excellence delivery (Boukis et al., 2015). Successful implementation of a marketing process that collaboratively achieves desired results for consumers and organizations requires managers to ensure effective internal company networks for employees (Zhu, 2015). In sum, Boukis et al. (2015) asserted managers were the most critical group to assure successful implementation of effective IM strategies. In addition to ensuring execution of market policies, first-line supervisor must also assure operational efficiencies.

Operational efficiencies. First-line supervisors encounter business problems related to operational efficiencies. Askenazy et al. (2012) noted retail managerial performance essentials include cost control in all aspects of the operation including labor, the need for flexible deployment of labor, as well as provisioning adequate levels of service. Similarly, Price (2015) suggested that in most instances, first-line supervisors do not set sales, cost, or labor budgets. However, Price (2015) indicated first-line supervisors are responsible for delivering against key performance indicators (KPIs) to achieve budgeted operational targets. Consequently, as the competitive environment heats up first-line supervisors must keep the operational budget balanced even with compressed

sales (Townsend & Russell, 2013). In addition to operational efficiencies, first-line supervisors must tackle problems associated with customer interactions.

Customer interactions. First-line supervisors must assure positive customer interactions through delivering standards, personal example, planning, and employee training and coaching. Iyer and Johlke (2015) suggested managers should model positive customer behavior to influence employees' attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, Bauer et al. (2013) asserted supervisors influence customer satisfaction and improving supervisors' decision making might be valuable to facilitating beneficial customer acquisition and retention decisions. Furthermore, organizations need to educate frontline employees to assess accurately customer expectations to ensure customer delight and increase an employee's ability to deal with dynamic and stressful service situations and environments (Barnes, Collier, & Robinson, 2014). While assuring quality of customer interactions, first-line supervisors must balance customer service with operational efficiency.

Balancing customer service and operational efficiency. Balancing quality customer service and operational efficiency might cause myriad problems for first-line supervisors. Evans (2015) suggested first-line supervisors were under pressure to control costs while simultaneously required to raise the competence of employees to deliver increasing levels of customer service. Furthermore, Luria, Yagil, and Gal (2014) indicated organizations might cause first-line supervisor and employee role conflict through double message situations in which they communicate financial indicators through one-channel and quality indicators through training or official communications

channels. Conversely, organizations can reduce customer related transaction costs while improving customer service through marketing and customer relationship management to create value for customers and the organization (Persson, 2013). Improving efficiency and customer service requires investment in resources and systems and failure to invest properly can lead to customer dissatisfaction.

Customer dissatisfaction. Customer dissatisfaction is a leading cause of lost revenue, profitability, and customer loyalty. Osarenkhoe and Komunda (2013) asserted management effectiveness in resolving customer complaints, as well as ensuring employee effectiveness had direct influence on customer satisfaction and loyalty constructs. Complicating the customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction continuum, store staff may lack competence in handling customer complaints and fail to resolve issues (Osarenkhoe & Komunda, 2013). Additionally, Bagdare (2013) noted retail frontline employees enhanced or sabotaged organizational brand based on the effectiveness of their performance relative to customer satisfaction and experience. Moreover, Guchait, Simons, and Pasamehmetoglu (2015) contended manager behavior perceived as ingenuous, including compromises in development and enforcement of service standards was ineffective and might counter service recovery practices. Complexities in customer interactions magnify the importance of the people-management-role first-line supervisors perform.

People management. People management is a critical aspect of first-line supervisor's role. Loveland, Thompson, Lounsbury, and Gibson (2016) suggested effective frontline management revolved around highly social tasks to build strong

relationships with subordinates along with customers. Townsend and Russell (2013) concluded first-line supervisors were critical to distributing internal communications to employees as intended by senior and middle managers. Townsend and Russell (2013) also suggested that first-line supervisors provide subordinates with an alternative management outlet to voice and resolve concerns versus escalating to higher levels of management. Conversely, Evans (2015) indicated the disparate strategies of cost containment and quality enhancement within customer service context constrained first-line supervisors in people management role. Ensuring a supply of qualified, effective resources is a critical aspect of the first-line supervisor's people management responsibilities.

Staffing. First-line supervisors should be involved in the hiring process to assure selection of talented resources that fit the role and organization. Organizations should seek to hire talented staff that to expand the skills-base and outperform competitors (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Hurrell and Scholarios (2014) indicated managers should design and execute recruitment and selection processes that support person-brand fit to reduce social skill gaps, especially in customer service interactions. Furthermore, Hurrell and Scholarios (2014) asserted organizational induction, training, and socialization practices should be contrived to facilitate allowing employees take an active role to understand their social surroundings to reduce social skills gaps, as well as inculcate cultural values. In sum, proper staffing and induction are important elements first-line supervisor people management and effectiveness. Adequate management communication is critical for frontline organizational success.

Communication. Creating an environment open, candid, and provides for employee voice is crucial for first-line supervisors. Armstrong and Taylor (2014) concluded regular dyadic communication between first-line supervisors and subordinates is critical for organizational performance. Additionally, supervisor communication and perspective taking positively influenced cooperation by assigned employees, and positively influenced financial and relational outcomes (Mor, Morris, & Joh, 2013). Specifically, managers who maintained a reciprocal communication relationship with subordinates may send distinct messages verbally and nonverbally that positively influenced unit outcomes (Mathe, Scott-Halsell, & Roseman, 2013). Conversely, Mathe et al. (2013) noted failing to maintain a reciprocal relationship with subordinates might inhibit completing goals, standards, or tasks needed to provide excellent service and customer satisfaction. First-line supervisor people-management-capabilities might affect employee effectiveness and performance.

Employee effectiveness and performance. First-line supervisors directly influence subordinate effectiveness and performance. Hurrell and Scholarios (2014) indicated managers should reinforce employee behaviors in customer service contexts that align with organizational brand image. First-line supervisors typically lead subordinate learning that is informal, hands-on, operationally focused, realistic and focused on the immediate situation to complete work tasks (Cohen, 2013). Moreover, first-line supervisor coaching abilities influenced employee role clarity, satisfaction, commitment, and were positively associated with organizational and personal performance (Kim, Egan, Kim, & Kim, 2013). Adding to the complexity of the first-line

role are responsibilities associated with human resources management and employee relations policies.

Human resource management and employee relations policies. Implementing and enforcing human resources management and employee relations policies are essential elements for line leaders. Townsend and Russell (2013) noted first-line supervisors are increasingly responsible for enacting human resources policies devolved from human resources as the closest supervisor to frontline employees. Evans (2015) suggested first-line supervisors are critical to the implementation of employee relations and human resource management strategies. Additionally, a first-line supervisor might enact organizational HR policies from a hierarchical perspective or operate as an employee coach by utilizing HR policies to advance and develop employee competence (Kilroy & Dundon, 2015). First-line supervisors must navigate problems associated with alignment of organizational practices and policies.

First-line supervisor success in implementing human resources management and employee relations policies are directly associated with organizational alignment. Sikora and Ferris (2014) proposed organizational leaders should insure organizational and operational practices and policies align to increase the probability that first-line managers will effectively implement HR practices. Furthermore, Sikora and Ferris (2014) asserted senior leaders should address organizational issues and related frontline supervisor communications prior to rolling out new HR practices. Additionally, Sikora and Ferris (2014) suggested first-line supervisors' ability, and ability or willingness, to execute the organization's HR practices might influence essential employee outcomes such as

intention to leave (turnover), job satisfaction, job performance, and procedural justice perceptions. Changes in the first-line supervisor role might complicate organizational and leadership problems handled by first-line supervisors.

Changing First-Line Supervisor Role

As the retail environment continues to evolve, the first-line supervisor role might change and adapt to assure competitive implementation of business strategy at the frontline. Townsend and Russell (2013) noted incumbent first-line supervisors described the content and volume of responsibilities of the first-line supervisor role as changing. In addition, Townsend and Russell (2013) suggested escalating changes might influence problem solving effectiveness, as well as recall. Furthermore, job enlargement in first-line supervisor accountabilities might negatively influence quality of work and attention to detail (Townsend & Russell, 2013). As the first-line supervisor role evolves, organizations must ensure skill development keeps pace with changes.

First-line supervisor skill development, effectiveness measures, and employee voice initiatives influence the success profile of the first-line supervisor role. Trivellas and Redklitis (2014) contended managers who possessed higher levels of leadership competencies were likely to produce higher levels job performance and job satisfaction. Likewise, knowledge, competency development, and interest in the role might influence first-line supervisor job satisfaction and performance (Trivellas & Redklitis, 2014). Additionally, appropriate support structures were necessary to assure first-line supervisor effectiveness in the performance of their role. Moreover, employee involvement (EI) schemes that emphasize high levels of employee autonomy and decision-making might

require first-line supervisors to become effective change leaders to address potential issues associated with EI (Benson, Kimmel, & Lawler III, 2014). The literature pertaining to the changing first-line supervisor role helps illuminate influences those changes impose on the role. Next, I discuss literature pertaining to the influences of customer satisfaction and organization performance on the first-line supervisor role.

Customer Satisfaction and Organization Performance

Customer satisfaction is inherently important to retail organizations as it leads to positive business outcomes and customer loyalty leading to competitive advantage. Customer satisfaction is a gauge of how a retail store fulfills customers' expectations (Jayasankaraprasad & Kumar, 2012). Customer satisfaction is the outcome of a customer's reaction to experience in comparison with expectations (Esbjerg et al., 2012). Customer satisfaction exerted influence on store loyalty, future purchase intentions, word-of-mouth communication, price sensitivity, and customer complaint behavior (Jayasankaraprasad, & Kumar, 2012). First-line supervisors must manage aspects of the customer experience in an effort to reinforce elements of the service-profit-chain.

Service-profit-chain. Frontline employees influence customer perceptions of the effectiveness of elements of an organization's service-profit-chain through execution of practices. Jayasankaraprasad, and Kumar (2012) concluded that customer satisfaction is directly tied to store loyalty and repurchase intentions which significantly influence store profitability. Likewise, customer loyalty is critical to conducting business in a competitive and unpredictable marketplace (Komunda & Osarenkhoe, 2012). The service-profit-chain should increase value and stakeholder connectedness.

First-line supervisors must ensure effective, consistent delivery of service expectations to increase the likelihood of perceived value by customers. Kaplan and Norton (2004) noted organizations might achieve perceived value by customers through assuring an enticing value proposition potentially increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty relative to other organizations. Furthermore, organizations may improve stakeholder connectedness, profitability and growth through revitalizing their governance structures and decision-making, including inculcation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) competencies (Filatotchev & Nakajima, 2014). Another aspect of customer satisfaction and organization performance is service quality.

Service quality. First-line supervisors directly influence execution of service programs, and the quality of delivery of those programs, to customers. Guchait, Kim, and Namasivayam (2012) suggested customers tend to praise or blame good or bad service delivery situations on frontline employees, supervisors, and leadership of the store and service organization. Dong and Siu (2013) found customers' evaluation of a service experience reflected perceptions and feelings about the entire servicescape and encounter. Furthermore, Martinelli and Balboni (2012) confirmed the importance of service quality in retail as a critical determinant of competitive advantage, and specifically, organizational performance. Frontline quality of delivery of customer service appears to influence customer satisfaction and overall perceptions of the service organization. First-line supervisors are responsible for delivering quality customer service in an effort to assure positive organization performance, however, some retail store managers lack

strategies to improve first-line problem-solving skills when first-line supervisor performance does not meet expectations.

Why Managers Lack Strategies

Retail store managers may lack strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities for a number of reasons. Ladany, Mori, and Mehr (2013) concluded that ineffective first-line supervisor skills, behaviors, and techniques are attributable, in part, to inadequate supervisory preparation and accountability. Furthermore, retail store managers may lack clear direction and performance management tools to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving skills (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Additionally, a lack of first-line supervisor role clarity might influence skill improvement strategies.

Retail store managers might lack strategies for reducing first-line supervisor role ambiguity in the face of increasing competitive complexity. Johlke and Iyer (2013) asserted frontline employees in a retail store must span the boundary between customers and the organization and attempt to balance potentially conflicting role expectations. Additionally, Rigopoulou, Theodosiou, Katsikea, and Perdakis (2012) concluded role ambiguity to have a negative influence on first-line supervisor motivation. Conversely, Rigopoulou et al. (2012) noted clarifying role accountabilities might improve first-line supervisor motivation and potentially job performance. Furthermore, Rigopoulou et al. (2012) identified several role clarity elements that are critical for role success, however, retail store managers who fail to employ these elements might fail to provide role clarity for first-line supervisors. The role clarity elements include (a) performance of daily

activities, (b) management of lower-level employees and customers, (c) effective methods, techniques, and procedures for accomplishing job tasks and improving performance, and (d) financial and other performance objectives the first-line supervisor must achieve within a specific period (Rigopoulou et al., 2012). Additionally, a lack of knowledge sharing and knowledge management practices might inhibit first-line supervisor problem-solving skill development.

Retail store managers might fail to develop, enforce, or use knowledge management strategies and tools that could enhance first-line supervisor performance. Mehrabani and Mohamad (2015) identified knowledge sharing and knowledge management as critical skills for leaders and closely aligned with effective problem solving. Furthermore, Mehrabani and Mohamad (2015) noted knowledge management might improve performance through improved efficiency, productivity, quality, and innovation, as well as improved decision-making, process improvement, and data integration. Knowledge management and other potential impediments to retail store managers employing strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem-solving underscores the rationale and potential business impact of this study.

Rationale and Potential Impact of This Study

The rationale for this study emerged from the belief that the first-line supervisor role in supermarkets is a complex yet underdeveloped role that is critical in an organization's quest to achieve competitive advantage through customer satisfaction. Townsend and Russell (2013) found first-line supervisors face myriad pressures including managing human resources policies, managing budgets, staff development and

communication, people management, and customer interaction. Furthermore, Townsend (2013) asserted that in many respects organizations have neglected to develop the first-line supervisor role. Moreover, Lloyd and Payne (2014) described the influence of managerial effectiveness as affected by a dichotomy in some supervisory roles where the supervisor functions as both a customer-facing worker, as well as a supervisor to other employees.

The potential impact of this study is in contributing to a gap in literature pertaining to strategies retail managers can use to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving skills through the lens of the skills-based leadership model. Dinh et al. (2014) noted the incidence of skills-based leadership theory studies was relatively low in scholarly literature between the years 2000 and 2012, representing 30 of 752 (4%) published articles. Additionally, Dinh et al. (2014) asserted thematic views of leadership, such as skills-based leadership, offer limited insight into how processes used by leaders influence performance outcomes. For example, Dinh et al. (2014) concluded researchers should address intertwined leadership processes to understand how organizational social systems influence evolving events.

This study contributed to the person-parts perspective of leadership literature. Hoffman and Lord (2013) contended person-parts perspective focused on the effects of leadership on performance activities and events. Findings from this study should help address Hoffman and Lord's (2013) assertion that developing proactive leadership skills in creating and responding to events is necessary to provide consistency, predictability,

and structure for followers, as well as contribute to discerning a leader's impact on organizational performance.

Transition

In Section 1, I provided the problem, purpose, the central research question, interview questions, research method and design, and a critical review of related literature. Section 2 includes a restatement of the purpose of this study and discussions including my role as the researcher, participants, the research method and design, and the population and sampling. Section 2 also includes an explanation of the steps taken to ensure ethical research, as well as details on data collection instruments, data collection techniques, and data analysis. Section 2 concludes with a discussion of reliability, validity, and a transition and summary. Section 3 consists of a presentation of the findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action and future research, reflections, and study conclusion.

Section 2: The Project

A qualitative case study approach was appropriate for exploring strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. Section 2 includes a restatement of the purpose of this study and discussions including the role of the researcher, participants, the research method and design, and the population and sampling. Section 2 also included an explanation of ethical research and details on data collection instruments, data collection techniques, and data analysis. Section 2 concluded with a discussion of reliability, validity, and a transition and summary.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies that some retail supermarket store managers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina used to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities. The population for this study therefore consisted of four retail supermarket store managers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina who had implemented strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. The implications for positive social change included enhancing flexible and effective workplaces through improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. Improved first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities can improve organizational performance that enables organizations to contribute positively to their communities by reducing workforce-workplace mismatch and improving employees' lives and well-being.

Role of the Researcher

In conducting this qualitative study, my role as researcher was as the primary data collection and analysis instrument, in alignment with Pezalla, Pettigrew, and Miller-Day (2012). The data collection process included semistructured interviews and exploration of organizational documentation pertaining to first-line supervisor role selection, training, and performance management. My role, in alignment with Yin (2014), was to (a) ask good questions, (b) listen well, (c) remain adaptive and open to opportunities, (d) ensure I had a good understanding of the topic under study, and (e) uphold ethical research standards, as well as mitigate biases. Further, I utilized the five-section case study protocol suggested by Yin (2014) to achieve my desired research goals.

The genesis of this study stemmed from my own personal experience. A researcher's personal experience and familiarity with experiences of participants might affect elements of the research process including participant recruitment, data collection, and data thematic approach and analysis (Berger, 2015). To conduct this study, I relied on my extensive behavioral interviewing skills and personal experience that included leading and managing various levels of customer-facing retail first-line supervisors and employees in various markets including Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I have a past professional relationship with the case organization; however, I had no personal or professional relationships with the participants for this study at the time of the study.

I used a purposeful sampling approach to find retail store managers who had experience using strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. I invited the potential participants to voluntarily participate in the study via email; upon

acceptance, each was provided with a consent form (see Appendix A). Yilmaz (2013) suggested that qualitative researchers utilize in-depth interviews, in part, to describe and understand the studied phenomenon through the participants' experiences. Dikko (2016), Jacob and Ferguson (2012), and Yin (2014) recommended using interview protocols to establish rules and guidelines are critical when conducting qualitative interviews. The interview protocol (see Appendix B) for this study therefore consisted of (a) establish rapport, (b) explain contents of consent form and address any ethical concerns, (c) gain permission to conduct the interview and start audio recording, (d) conduct semistructured interview utilizing identified interview questions, (e) explain member-checking and schedule a follow-up interview, and (g) record reflective observations and notes. The combination of interviews, company artifact examination, and reflexive journaling facilitated data analysis triangulation, as suggested by Klonoski (2013) and Yin (2014).

I followed Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements and provisions of the Belmont Report (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979) that provided guidelines for protection of human participant rights through the process of informed consent in research involving human subjects. Research design should include participant informed consent decisions and assure responsiveness to ethical concerns (Yilmaz, 2013). Qualitative researchers face technical and interpersonal issues in conducting a study that might lead to personal and ethical dilemmas (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Yin (2014) asserted a researcher should test personal tolerance to contrary findings as effective in removing bias. Berger (2015) suggested a researcher must recognize and take responsibility for personal placement and subsequent influence

within the research study, as well as critically self-evaluate to minimize bias. As previously noted, I had a past working relationship with the case organization and the topic that required me to mitigate the risk of bias. During data collection, I therefore attempted to minimize bias through triangulation of data analysis including member checking, documentation review, utilizing qualitative data management software, and reflexive journaling to assure honest and accurate data interpretation.

Participants

When conducting a qualitative case study, a researcher must assure the unit of analysis studied relates to the overarching research question (Yin, 2014). The target population consisted of retail supermarket store managers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, who had experience implementing strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving skills. The participants for this study were four retail store managers from a supermarket chain based in North Carolina.

Prior to commencing research, I obtained permission from the case organization (see Appendix C) and obtained a list of potential participants. I used a typical case purposeful sampling approach to find participants for this study. A purposeful sample of participants who have experience with the phenomenon under study is appropriate for an intensive case study (Bernard, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Robinson, 2014). I selected participants based on the following eligibility criteria that aligned with the specific problem-statement of this study: (a) were retail supermarket store managers, (b) were over 18 years of age, and (c) had experience implementing strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving skills. I obtained access to participants after

receiving IRB approval. I contacted participants via email to invite each to participate and attached a copy of the consent form (see Appendix A) requesting that they send a confirmation email to me. I followed-up with a telephone call to confirm receipt of participants' consent to participate in the study, briefly discussed the study interview process and schedule each initial interview, and began building rapport with the consenting participants.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

Researchers should choose an appropriate research method and design when planning and conducting a research study. A methodical plan of action and dedication to employing a formal method is critical to a successful study (Yin, 2014). The three common research methods include quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Early, 2014). While all three methods were appropriate in design consideration for this study, the selected method and design best fit the nature of the study. Bernard (2013) asserted different types of data require different analytical methods. Bernard further asserted quantitative and qualitative methods share similarities and no study is truly one or the other. Conversely, Marshall and Rossman (2016) asserted qualitative method differs from quantitative as qualitative researchers design questions seeking a broader view to explore a problem or studied phenomenon. Spillman (2014) suggested mixing methods strengthens behavioral studies through descriptive value of social phenomena data sets.

I specifically chose a qualitative research methodology to study strategies retail store managers used to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities.

Qualitative method is a type of measurement that identifies interesting problems, as well as causes and consequences and explains why occurrences happen (Bernard, 2013).

Qualitative researchers are concerned with improving organizational development practices and performance through collaborative social inquiry (Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman, 2015). On the other hand, Hammersley (2012) proposed qualitative research might not be appropriate for generating explanatory theory. Furthermore, Hammersley (2012) asserted human behavior is dependent on character and is contingent, therefore not necessarily conforming to probabilistic causation. Nevertheless, Spillman (2014) concluded that qualitative researchers could validate general causation through using thick description, which supported my decision to utilize qualitative research methodology in this study. Qualitative methods are best suited when the research objective is to explore a phenomenon under study (Khan, 2014).

The focus of this study was to explore strategies retail store managers used to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. The goal of this research query was to generate rich textural data that contained depth and breadth in substance to address the central research question. Quantitative research methods tend to be positivist approaches utilized to aggregate, measure, and analyze causal relationships between variables (Khan, 2014; Yilmaz, 2013) and as such were not appropriate for this study. Quantitative measurement tests how much a variable might explain a phenomenon rather than explain if the variable is a plausible explanation for the phenomenon (Bernard, 2013). Mixed methods studies combine qualitative and quantitative data collection in the same study (Bernard, 2013). While combining qualitative and quantitative methods might

improve research rigor, managing larger-scale research projects may increase associated costs and extend the timeframe frame to completion (Raich, Müller, & Abfalter, 2014). Guercini (2014) argued that conducting mixed methods research increases time and cost; however, the resulting insights provide rich insights. Mixed methods approach did not meet the needs of this study due to time constraints and the associated in depth data collection and analysis processes involved.

Research Design

The research aim of this study was to explore and understand strategies used by retail store managers to improve first line supervisor problem solving abilities within the context of the case organization. As previously noted, a case study research design provided the opportunity to explore strategies used by participants to improve first-line supervisor's problem-solving abilities. A case study research design is suitable to examine a current and complex, real-life phenomenon, or bounded system, and employs multiple data collection sources to develop an extensive depiction and analysis of the case (Yin, 2014). Qualitative case study research design is flexible compared to other qualitative designs (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014). Case studies are useful for exhaustive and thorough descriptions of complex social phenomena such as found in business and organizations (Baškarada, 2014), which aligned with my study goals.

Ethnographic qualitative design focus is on immersive data collection within a culture-sharing group over a protracted period (Gill, 2014; Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012). Marshall and Rossman (2016) asserted ethnographic researchers are interested in studying an entire group that form, share, and maintain a common culture. Ethnographic

researchers analyze members of a group through the lens of that cultural group (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Ethnographic research design was not suitable for this study because the study did not focus on shared culture of a human group (Gill, 2014).

A qualitative phenomenological design focus is on lived experiences of participants without regard for time or boundaries (Gill, 2014). The phenomenological researcher seeks to transcend the phenomenon studied to understand the essence of the described lived experiences of the individual participants (Petty et al., 2012). Marshall and Rossman (2016) described the goal of phenomenological research as seeking to explore, describe, and analyze life lived by individuals. I considered but did not choose phenomenology based on the need to consider philosophical underpinnings that form the foundation of phenomenology (Gill, 2014) to transcend the topic. Furthermore, while phenomenological analytic methods, such as Smith's (1996) interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), can be a fit to analyze a single case study (Gill, 2014), I chose not to utilize IPA for data analysis.

Gill (2014) suggested researchers use narrative design to gather personal biographical experiences of participants without regard for particular timeframes or boundaries. Narrative research design utilizes detailed, thematic analysis and chronological composition of lived experiences of an individual or small group (Hunt, 2014; Petty et al., 2012). This study did not involve chronologically narrated life stories or experiences of individuals (Hunt, 2014), so a narrative design was not appropriate.

Researchers seek to show data saturation as evidence of quality criteria related to sample adequacy (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013; O'Reilly & Parker,

2012; Trotter II, 2012). Data saturation describes the point at which a researcher discerns continued data collection will supply minimal, if any, new information pertaining to a particular matter (Morse, Lowery, & Steury, 2014). Conversely, O'Reilly and Parker (2012) asserted there is confusion as to the definition and applicability of data saturation as a measure of quality in qualitative research. O'Reilly and Parker contended that data saturation, as a concept, might not be a universally appropriate criterion for establishing quality across all qualitative research approaches. The interview process continued until I concluded data saturation was achieved and documentation review was utilized to confirm completeness. In this study, I compared data gathered from multiple sources to determine data completeness, as well as confirmed that the sources provided a complete picture of the phenomena (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). This aligned with Marshall and Rossman's (2016) suggestion to use data source triangulation to corroborate the research question under study.

Population and Sampling

The unit of analysis for this single case study (Bernard, 2013; Yin, 2014) was comprised of retail supermarket managers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, employed by the case organization who utilized strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. Discussion of the level of inquiry in a qualitative study aids the researcher in subsequent data collection decisions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Yin (2014) asserted that defining a type of sample in a case study might be misleading and inadvertently mimic statistical generalization. Baškarada (2014) and Yin (2014) suggested identifying holistic or embedded units of analysis within a single case study

versus identifying a sample from a general population. Runeson and Höst (2009) further asserted researchers should intentionally choose holistic or embedded units of analysis in a single case. On the other hand, Robinson (2014), and Runeson and Höst (2009) found a typical case purposeful sampling strategy was appropriate for single case study design (Robinson, 2014; Runeson, & Höst, 2009). Moreover, a review of extant literature provided support for identifying a purposive sample for single case research (Bernard, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Robinson, 2014).

In this study, I used the idiographic nature of qualitative case research to explore and understand strategies retail store managers used to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving skills. The qualitative researcher determines the size of the sample based on the type of research conducted (Khan, 2014). Dworkin (2012) observed sample size is subject to wide variability in qualitative research studies. Research with a participant interview focus typically utilizes a sample size small enough to allow for individual voice within the study (Robinson, 2014). Robinson (2014), for instance, suggested a qualitative case study sample size might range from 1 - 16 participants depending on the type of analysis utilized or theoretical insight employed in the study. Marshall and Rossman (2016) indicated case studies may have a sample size as small as one participant; however, the decision should be informed with a sample adequate to provide a view of the phenomenon studied. Conversely, Marshall et al. (2013) recommended single case studies should contain a sample of 15 to 30.

One method of justifying sample size is by precedent set in extant literature (Marshall et al., 2013). Iden (2016) conducted a qualitative single case study to identify

strategies for managing a multigenerational workforce that included a sample size of three participants. Likewise, Gholston (2015) utilized a qualitative single case study to develop strategies for hiring employees based on organizational fit that included a sample size of four participants. Further, Thomas (2015) used a qualitative single case study to explore strategies managers use to retain information technology professionals that included a sample size of two participants. The sample size for this study was within published study ranges compared to qualitative single case studies in extant literature. I monitored data collection and should an unanticipated need arise to change the sample size based on the needs of the study; I would have altered it accordingly (Robinson, 2014). Palinkas et al. (2015) described the need to use emergent sampling in qualitative research. I conducted interviews until sufficient data saturation was reached (Morse et al., 2014; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Runeson & Höst, 2009).

The criterion for selecting participants included status as a retail store manager in the case organization and assigned to a store in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The participants had to be at least 18 years of age and had experience implementing strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving skills. To assure data quality in qualitative research, participants sampled should best represent the phenomenon under study to provide analytical insights (Khan, 2014; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Petty et al., 2012). Participants who did not meet the specified criteria were not eligible to participate in this study.

I utilized face-to-face interviews to aid in achieving research objectives, and answer questions, in this study (Khan, 2014). Interview setting should be as comfortable

as possible without excessive background noise and other distractions to allow for uninterrupted interview session (Dikko, 2016; Jacob & Ferguson, 2012); the interview setting for this study was chosen to enable participants to provide open and honest responses to research questions in a comfortable, quiet environment. In accordance with Khan's (2014) recommendation that the researcher should ensure the interview setting provides a relaxed environment that facilitates participant motivation to openly share experiences (Khan, 2014), I allowed participants to choose the interview settings to provide personal comfort so long as the location provided a quiet, confidential environment for the interview.

Ethical Research

Research ethics is an important aspect of any research study. The qualitative researcher knows benefits and potential harm to participants, and as such, has a moral obligation to protect participants (Khan, 2014). To assure ethical protection of participants in this study, I sought permission of the Walden University IRB prior to commencing research. Further, I obtained permission from the case organization to complete the study with that organization. Upon receiving IRB approval and permission from the case organization, I sent an introductory email to potential participants who met eligibility criteria. The introductory email contained the informed consent form. Once I received an email confirmation from a potential participant I scheduled a follow-up call to review the informed consent form, including intent of the study, note assurance of confidentiality, and addressed any concerns related to participation in the study.

I obtained a signed copy of the form from participants indicating their voluntary willingness to participate in this study (see Appendix A). Participant informed consent is a key ethical requirement in social behavioral research and centered on the protection of privacy and judgment (Udo-Akang, 2013). As indicated in the informed consent form, consenting participants participated on a voluntary basis and could withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. I did not offer monetary or other incentives for participation in this study; however, I did provide participants an explanation of the potential social benefits of the research to others as an alternative to incentives (Robinson, 2014), as well as a summary of study findings.

Ethical factors in case study research include confidentiality of personal and organizational data, and handling sensitive study results (Runeson, & Höst, 2009). A researcher should ensure participant confidentiality and privacy in the research process (Khan, 2014). To ensure confidentiality and privacy, I used alphanumeric codes (P1 to P4) to identify participants and mask the case organization by labeling the organization *RetailCo*. I will also store all data collected (hard copy and digital) in a locked cabinet for five years to protect rights of participants, as recommended by Yin (2014). In addition to these security measures, digital data was stored on password-protected and encrypted media; I will destroy all study-related data after 5 years. This research was supervised by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (approval #:07-18-16-0525889, expiration date: 07-17-2017).

Data Collection Instruments

Data collection in case study research necessitates the researcher to integrate the data collection plan with real-world events thereby making it essential to properly design study field procedures (Yin, 2014). I was the primary data collection instrument in this study, and as such, I utilized a semistructured interview technique and archived company documentation to collect data. Researchers conducting case study research collect data from multiple sources and might benefit from integrating both perceptual and objective data (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). Semistructured interviews provide the researcher with a guide to steer the conversation yet provide flexibility to refocus, or prompt for additional information, based on emergent themes in the discussion (Baškarada, 2014; Yin, 2014).

After obtaining informed consent from participants, I conducted semistructured, face-to-face interviews utilizing the established interview protocol (see Appendix B). I followed the interview protocol by setting a time, date, and location for the interview that was convenient for the participant, as well as address any privacy and comfort concerns of the participant. I used a handheld digital recorder, with permission from the participant, to aid in understanding and transcribing interview data. In conjunction with interviews, I reviewed organizational documentation related to first-line supervisor role selection, training, and performance management to aid in triangulation. At the conclusion of the interview, I scheduled a member checking follow-up interview. Member checking helps the researcher assure accurate interpretation of data collected from each participant (Koelsch, 2014; Yilmaz, 2013). I utilized reflexive journaling to record interview observations and notes to aid in data triangulation. The combination of

interviews, company artifact examination, and reflexive journaling facilitated data analysis triangulation (Klonoski, 2013; Yin, 2014) in this study. Self-reflexivity is useful for qualitative researchers in calibrating all instruments into one standard of accuracy (Pezalla et al., 2012).

Data Collection Technique

The data collection process began via an email invitation to each potential participant. I utilized a follow-up telephone call to confirm receipt of participants' consent form to participate in the study, as well as briefly introduce, and discuss the study interview process and schedule each initial interview, and began building rapport with the consenting participants. This study included semistructured interviews as an appropriate data collection technique. Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012) indicated semistructured interviews were central to obtaining participants' accounts and experiences of the phenomena under study. Gholston (2015) and Iden (2016) utilized semistructured interviews as part of data collection in qualitative single case studies to explore participants' experiences in the respective phenomena under study.

Semistructured interviews provide the researcher with flexible, yet restricted, questions for participants designed to elicit answers within a given stem of inquiry (Morse, 2015). Yu, Abdullah, and Saat (2014) suggested researchers exclusively using an interview format run the risk of inadequate data collection results. Marshall and Rossman (2016) indicated in depth interviews generate considerable data that complicates data analysis and interpretation, as well as require thoughtful preparation by the interviewer to assure success. Marshall and Rossman (2016) indicated successful interviews involve

interviewer-interviewee trust that might be at risk should the interviewer not adequately prepare or lacks adequate interviewing skills. Another disadvantage to semistructured interviews is the potential for the researcher to steer, or manipulate, participants to obtain data (Elo et al., 2014). The planned interview duration for all interviews was approximately 60 minutes and I made every effort to accommodate participants' schedules. At the conclusion of each interview, I requested organizational documentation related to first-line supervisor role selection, training, and performance management. Additionally, I requested and scheduled a member checking follow-up interview with each participant.

I conducted member checking with participants according to the established interview protocol (see Appendix B) to assure I accurately represented participants' responses (Koelsch, 2014), as well as capture strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. Koelsch (2014) asserted member checking is an important element in qualitative research validation. Yilmaz (2013) described member checking as providing participants the opportunity to review and determine if a final report accurately reflects their viewpoints. Petty et al. (2012) indicated member checking permitted participants to verify and comment researcher data interpretations. I asked participants for any corrections and took notes based on their responses and changes. A member check interview is a means to capture emergent topics from the participant and not just as a method to confirm or disconfirm accuracy of statements (Koelsch, 2014). This process repeated until I achieved data saturation with each participant. As the researcher, I determined when data saturation was achieved and further data collection yielded little or

no new information pertaining to the phenomenon under study (Morse et al., 2014; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Trotter II, 2012).

Case study researchers utilize a combination of data collection strategies, including document review and analysis, based on the researcher's judgment of the best approach to explore the phenomenon under study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Iden (2016) and Yin (2014) concluded organizational supporting documentation review permitted access to company data not otherwise available to the researcher. Documentary analysis might enrich a researcher's understanding of the phenomena being studied (Russell & Brannan, 2016).

To aid in overcoming potential bias and data collection triangulation, I utilized reflexive journaling. Qualitative researchers must focus on self-monitoring and sensitivity to mitigate the influence of personal biases, beliefs, and personal experiences (Berger, 2015). Given my personal experience as a retail store manager in the Winston-Salem, North Carolina market, it was necessary to turn the lens of research onto myself through utilizing a reflexive journal in order to pay attention to the impact of my personal experience on this study (Berger, 2015). Gill (2013) suggested it is impossible for a researcher to achieve fully detached reflection and never free of assumptions created by experience, culture, and traditions. A reflexive, or reflective, journal aids in illustrating transparency about how decisions are made, the researcher's history, and personal interests, including how these perspectives affected data collection (Houghton et al., 2013).

Data Organization Technique

Data organization is an iterative, ongoing aspect of data analysis that should commence when beginning analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). An established case study database comprised of electronic (digital) files and portfolio (hard copy) materials stored in a file drawer or archival box is critical for data organization (Yin, 2014). Baškarada (2014) indicated the importance of establishing a case study database to store study-related evidence, as well as facilitating a chain of evidence and audit trail from data collection to data analysis to conclusions. I stored all electronic (digital) and hard copy materials and artifacts in a locked storage drawer. Reflexive journaling and field notes were hand-written and stored in a three-ring binder. The voice recorder I used was USB-enabled to facilitate collecting data for transcription. Digital recording devices typically reduce time and cost for data management and aid in avoiding a loss of data (Bernard, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Tessier, 2012). I transcribed interview audio recordings and collected artifacts into MAXQDA (VERBI GmbH, n.d.) computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). CAQDAS applications, such as MAXQDA, are efficient tools to store, organize, sort, and code data throughout the research process (Lancaster, Di Milia, & Cameron, 2013; Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). However, CAQDAS applications do not analyze data, rather the qualitative researcher utilizes the software to aid in the analytic process (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). I will store all data collected (hard copy and digital) in a locked cabinet for a period of 5 years and then all study-related data will be promptly destroyed.

Data Analysis

A central characteristic of qualitative research involves the researcher interpreting and making inferences about collected data (Morse, Lowery, & Steury, 2014).

Triangulation is a data analysis process that aids the researcher in demonstrating evidence of rigor, trustworthiness, and robustness of qualitative research design (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researchers utilize triangulation as a strategy to appraise data, as an alternative to validity, through source convergence (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). Carter et al. (2014) and Yin (2014) identified four types of triangulation, including: (a) method triangulation, (b) investigator triangulation, (c) theory triangulation, and (d) data triangulation. Methodological triangulation is the appropriate data analysis process for this study to guide analysis of data from interviews, case company documents, and reflexive journaling. Denzin (2012) suggested utilizing methodological triangulation as a strategy, utilizing multiple sources of evidence, in which the researcher attempts to establish in depth comprehension of the phenomenon under study.

This study was a manifestation of the specific business problem elaborated in the central research question, and guided by the conceptual framework. The skills-based leadership model informed the study exploring strategies retail store managers utilized to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. The skills-based leadership model was appropriate as leadership is a type of skilled performance and first-line supervisors develop skills and knowledge as they progress through their careers (Mumford et al., 2000). The interview questions elaborated the central research question of the study

(Kaczynski, Salmons, & Smith, 2014; Yin, 2016). The interview questions should inform the central research question, as well as provide within-method triangulation with case company documentation and reflexive journaling. Data analysis iteratively informed interpretation in this study.

Data analysis and interpretation are interwoven, iterative processes undertaken to achieve coherent sense of the phenomena in case study research (Simons, 2015). I used Yin's (2016) five phases of qualitative data analysis in this study. The five phases included: (1) compiling, (2) disassembling, (3) reassembling, (4) interpreting, and (5) concluding. As part of phase one, compiling, I entered all data (interview audio recordings, collected artifacts, and reflexive journal entries) into MAXQDA (VERBI GmbH, n.d.) to aid in data analysis (Yin, 2016). Lancaster, Di Milia, and Cameron (2013) suggested use of a CAQDAS facilitates coding, conceptualizing concepts and ideas, and then identifying themes in the data. In phase two, disassembling, I followed a coding process, and then in phase three, reassembling, conceptualized emerging patterns and identified themes in the data. This approach encompassed Yin's (2016) reassembling phase. The qualitative researcher, not the CAQDAS, analyzes and interprets research data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). As part of phase 4, interpretation, I interpreted the research data to explain the phenomena under study, and strategies retail store managers utilized to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. Phase 4 was consistent with the interpretation phase proposed by Yin (2016). In phase 5, concluding, I created the narratives and conclusion associated with the importance of understanding complex

organizational behavior associated with strategies retail store managers utilized to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities, in alignment with Yin (2016).

Reliability and Validity

Qualitative studies address validity and reliability through dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Yilmaz, 2013). Researchers evaluate the rigor of qualitative research according to criteria that are uniquely different from quality criteria for quantitative research (Noble & Smith, 2015; Petty et al., 2012). The benchmark to judge the rigor of qualitative data is the extent which they permit the reader to enter the situation or setting under study (Yilmaz, 2013). A qualitative researcher utilizes multiple strategies to demonstrate quality and rigor in a study.

Reliability

Dependability is the qualitative corollary for reliability (Yilmaz, 2013). Petty et al. (2012) indicated dependability in a study addresses consistency, and auditability of the research process, as well as the extent the research is repeatable and variability in results understood. Houghton et al. (2013) contended confirmation of results by multiple participants supports dependability in data analysis. Moreover, dependability addresses dynamic changes in data analysis throughout the process how insights might influence the researcher's approach to the study (Petty et al., 2012).

Establishing dependability of data involves demonstrating stability over time and under varying conditions as well providing an audit trail another researcher can steadily follow to assess trustworthiness of the study (Elo et al., 2014). I utilized within method triangulation of interviews, company documentation, and reflexive journaling and notes

to aid in demonstrating evidence of rigor, trustworthiness, and robustness of this study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I utilized iterative member checking with participants to demonstrate data quality using a combination of in-person interviews and email discussions. Harvey (2015) suggested member checking is the process of iteratively validating interpretative summaries of responses for verification and accuracy. Houghton et al. (2013) indicated member checking is critical to assure the researcher captures meaning and word choice from an interview. A reflexive journal provided for auditability by illustrating transparency about the decision-making process throughout the study (Houghton et al., 2013). I utilized a reflexive journal to document research procedures and participant observations, and to ensure dependability, throughout all phases of data collection and analysis.

Validity

Qualitative researchers demonstrate research rigor and accuracy through the concepts of credibility, confirmability, and transferability (Yilmaz, 2013). Credibility refers to the extent to which participants can trust or believe the findings of a study, as well as the willingness of external parties to recognize study findings (Petty et al. 2012). Appropriate strategies to demonstrate credibility criterion might include member checking, triangulation, observation, and reflexive journaling (Elo et al., 2014; Kemparaj & Chavan, 2013; Petty et al., 2012). Confirmability refers to the degree findings objectively reflect the intended focus, relevance, and accuracy of the data under study (Kemparaj & Chavan, 2013). Appropriate strategies to demonstrate confirmability might

include creating an audit trail, member checking, triangulation, and reflexive journaling (Kemparaj & Chavan, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Petty et al., 2012).

I utilized within-method triangulation to ensure credibility by converging interviews, company documentation, and reflexive journaling and notes as data sources. Collection of data from multiple sources is a foundational aspect of case study research design and as such, methodological triangulation of data sources is a primary strategy supporting convergence of sources, as well as confirmation of multiple sources (Yin, 2016). Carter et al. (2014) and Marshall and Rossman (2016) described triangulation as using multiple data sources to corroborate the research question under study and to appraise data. I utilized member checking to validate and interpret participant's responses accurately (Harvey, 2015; Houghton et al., 2013). I created an audit trail through producing a reflexive journal (Houghton et al., 2013; Kaczynski et al., 2014; Petty et al., 2012).

Qualitative transferability is the corollary to quantitative external validity (Kemparaj & Chavan, 2013; Petty et al., 2012). Elo et al. (2014) suggested transferability in qualitative research refers to the potential applications of findings to another context. Petty et al. (2012) indicated transferability is the degree findings might apply to other contexts or participants. I leave evaluation of transferability to the reader and discussion of transferability related to the findings of this study rests with the reader to make decisions about usefulness in other contexts and future research, as suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2016).

Marshall et al. (2013), O'Reilly and Parker (2012), and Trotter II (2012) suggested data saturation indicated evidence of quality criteria related to sample adequacy. To achieve data saturation, I conducted interviews until sufficient data saturation was reached, as recommended by Morse et al. (2014), O'Reilly and Parker (2012), and Runeson and Höst (2009). This included the iterative aspect of data analysis in which continued coding was not practical, in alignment with Fusch and Ness (2015).

Transition and Summary

The goal of this study was to explore strategies retail store managers used to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. Section 1 consisted of the background, the problem statement, the purpose statement, the conceptual framework, and a comprehensive literature review of other various elements that contributed to the basis of this study. The objective of Section 2 was to describe the qualitative single case study design approach and to ensure I addressed the relevant expectations of ethical research, qualitative corollaries of reliability and validity, data collection, and data analysis. Section 3 consists of a presentation the findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action and future research, reflections, and study conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Section 3 presents the findings of the study. Section 3 also includes presentation of application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action and future research, reflections, and study conclusion. I present and organize the study findings by the main themes.

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies that some U.S. retail supermarket store managers used to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities. Data for this study came from semistructured interviews with four store managers, and review of company documentation, from a retail supermarket company (RetailCo) in the Winston-Salem metro area in North Carolina. The store manager participants in this study identified strategies that they used to improve first-line supervisors' problem-solving abilities. The four main themes that emerged from the data were communicating expectations, performance coaching, first-line supervisor learning and development, and measuring performance.

Presentation of the Findings

Data collection for this study was comprised of semistructured interviews and member checking with four store managers, plus a review of RetailCo company documentation, field notes, and reflexive journaling. The data collected guided the process of answering the central research question: "What strategies do retail supermarket managers use to improve first-line supervisors' problem solving abilities?" The participants spoke candidly about their experiences with improving first-line

supervisor problem solving abilities and they were aware they were free to excuse themselves from participation at any time. No participant withdrew from the study. One female and three male participants responded to each of six interview questions; the participants had an average of 4.2 years of experience as a retail store manager.

Upon completion of the data collection process, I used MAXQDA (VERBI GmbH, n.d.) qualitative data analysis software to store, organize, sort, and aid in coding data. I analyzed the data utilizing Yin's (2016) five phases of qualitative data analysis and methodological triangulation with all sources of data contributing equally to the study findings. The findings identified strategies retail store managers can use to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities. The analysis of data showed 237 coded statements, 29 unique codes, and 14 emergent themes, which I categorized into four main themes. The first theme was the importance of communicating expectations with first-line supervisors. The second theme pertained to coaching first-line supervisors on performance. The third theme related to first-line supervisor learning and development. The fourth and final theme related to measuring first-line supervisor performance. These themes aligned with the skills-based leadership model (Mumford et al., 2000), which was the conceptual framework for this study.

Theme 1: Communicating Expectations

The first theme that developed from the data was the importance of communicating expectations with first-line supervisors. The participants' interview responses and company documents mentioned communicating expectations with first-line supervisors 103 times, representing 43.46% of all responses (see Table 2). These

responses and documents showed strategies relating to store managers communicating expectations with first-line supervisors.

Table 2

Frequency of First Main Theme

Theme	<i>n</i>	Rate of Occurrence
Communicating expectations	103	43.46%

Participant responses and company documentation such as store manager and first-line supervisor training guides showed the importance of communicating expectations with first-line supervisors, including ensuring those expectations were cascaded to the first-line supervisor's subordinates. This finding aligned with the conceptual framework, in which Mumford et al. (2000) asserted that leaders implement effective problem solutions within a social context and should possess social performance skills, including communication. The importance of communicating expectations theme paralleled Steele and Plenty's (2015) statement that communication competence was critical for leaders. These findings also confirmed previous research by Janhonen and Lindström (2015).

I identified several subthemes within the first main theme that were corroborated by current research. These subthemes related to communicating expectations were: (a) communication, (b) accountability, (c) set and clarify expectations, (d) follow-up on expected performance, and (e) enable performance and handle mistakes.

Table 3

Frequency of Communicating Expectations Subthemes

Subthemes	<i>n</i>	Rate of Occurrence
Communication	22	9.28%
Accountability	18	7.59%
Set and clarify expectations	8	3.38%
Follow-up on expected performance	18	7.59%
Enable performance and handle mistakes	37	15.61%

Communication. Mathe, Scott-Halsell, and Roseman (2013) found managers who maintained a reciprocal communication relationship with subordinates may send distinct messages verbally and nonverbally that positively influenced unit outcomes. The importance of effective leader communication was evident in respective leadership tenets sections in store manager and first-line supervisor training checklists. Regular dyadic communication between first-line supervisors and subordinates is critical for organizational performance (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Participant responses ($n = 22$) and company documents suggested store managers communicated expectations, and that ensured first-line supervisors communicated expectations with their respective subordinates (see Table 3). Participants specifically addressed the communication subtheme during interviews with statements such as:

- “A store manager must communicate expectations, it is critical to cascade things to first-line supervisors.” (P1)

- “A store manager must communicate expectations and ensure first-line supervisors communicate those expectations, as well as ensure they put them in place.” (P2)
- “First-line supervisors constantly encounter problems so a store manager must communicate expectations.” (P3)
- “Store managers should maintain communication with first-line supervisors, ensure they understand expectations or on the same page.” (P4)

Accountability. Lloyd and Payne (2014) stated that first-line supervisors manage the frontline delivery of customer service and must possess the ability to handle multiple accountabilities while also resolving organization and leadership problems. The information contained in store manager and first-line supervisor training checklists and annual goal setting guides emphasized the importance of responsibility and personal ownership and accountability for results by first-line supervisors. Rigopoulou et al. (2012) noted clarifying role accountabilities might improve first-line supervisor motivation and potentially job performance. This aligned with participant responses: the participants mentioned holding first-line supervisors accountable 18 times in interviews (see Table 3). All participants discussed this subtheme:

- “Hold first-line supervisors accountable for desired service culture, demonstrated brand differentiation, and behavior demonstrated by departments (subordinates).” (P1)
- “You must hold first-line supervisors responsible and accountable for what you expect.” (P2)

- “It is important to hold first-line supervisors accountable for solving problems.” (P3)
- “A store manager should be personally accountable for first-line supervisors' development, as well as delegated accountability.” (P4)

Set and clarify expectations. Pulakos, Hanson, Arad, and Moye (2015)

concluded that managers should set ongoing performance goals and expectations as part of an effective performance management system. Store manager job description documents and The leadership tenets sections in store manager and first-line supervisor training checklists identified the importance of setting expectations through leader communication. Establishing high performance expectations might lead to enhanced effort and task performance (Barier, Hansez, Chmiel, & Demerouti, 2013). Rekonen and Björklund (2016) asserted that managers should provide structural support through coordination, and that they should also clarify and set expectations to link essential work group objectives. Participants mentioned set and clarify expectations subtheme in 3.38% of interview responses (see Table 3), notably:

- “A store manager must provide first-line supervisors with the tools and a model of expected performance to be successful.” (P4)
- “It is critical to establish ownership in first-line supervisors for their departments so they act like it is their own business . . . a store manager must set expectations.” (P3)

Follow-up on expected performance. Rees and Porter (2015) described following-up on expected performance as a control mechanism to monitor results of

delegated authority. Hamrin (2016) concluded that monitoring performance was a critical aspect of communicating expectations and communicative leadership. Store manager and first-line supervisor training checklists identified the importance of following up to ensure expected performance. Participant interview responses ($n = 18$) and company documentation review indicated store managers followed-up on expected performance with first-line supervisors. Participants addressed this subtheme:

- “Following up to confirm understanding and follow-through is critical” (P1)
- “A store manager should incorporate follow-up for pertinent business issues into review and actions with first-line supervisors.” (P2)
- “Follow-up! Check and inspect what you expect.” (P4)
- “Visually inspect, observe, and follow-up.” (P2)

Enable performance and handle mistakes. Hamrin (2016) suggested that positive dyadic communication practices between leaders and subordinates can strengthen the leaders-subordinate relationship, as well as positively impact the workplace. Stincelli and Baghurst (2014) indicated that influence, collaboration, and commitment to shared values and goals were determinants of both perceptions of informal leadership and perceptions of effective formal leadership. Furthermore, Scott et al. (2011) concluded leaders should create an inclusive culture in a workgroup to provide benefits related to improved communication, improved problem solving, and team cohesion. The importance of enabling first-line supervisor performance and handling mistakes was evident in the store manager training checklist document and store manager job description. Brown, Kulik, and Lim (2015) asserted that managers handling

subordinates' mistakes, or performance failures, of first-line supervisors might involve using tactics such as communicating positive and negative feedback that encourages employee involvement. Participant mentioned enabling first-line supervisor performance and handling mistakes subtheme 37 times in interviews. The store manager job description and store manager training checklist included statements related to enabling performance and handling mistakes. Participants expressed insights related to the enable performance and handle mistakes subtheme:

- “Store manager should also relate to first-line supervisors that they believe in them.” (P4)
- “Store managers should provide positive recognition (kudos) when following up and in communication. Praise and constructive feedback through coaching is paramount. Positive reinforcement, no matter what, and constructive feedback when necessary, are critical to ensure first-line supervisors (and people, in general) know they are doing a good job and have information they need to do a good job.” (P2)
- “The store manager can inhibit effective problem solving by not expressing confidence in first-line supervisors.” (P3)

Theme 2: Performance Coaching

The second main theme identified additional strategies utilized by store managers to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities. Within this theme, participants discussed the importance of key factors in coaching first-line supervisors to improve performance. As indicated in Table 4, participant interview responses and company

documents mentioned first-line supervisor performance coaching 63 times, or 26.58% of all responses.

Table 4

Frequency of Second Main Theme

Theme	<i>n</i>	Rate of Occurrence
Performance coaching	63	26.58%

Company documentation such as store manager job description, store manager and first-line supervisor training checklists, and participant responses, indicated the importance practicing performance coaching with first-line supervisors, personal reflection by the store manager, and reducing first-line supervisor role conflict. These findings supported the conceptual framework, the skills-based leadership model (Mumford et al., 2000), in which Mumford et al. posited coaching as a social performance skill. The performance coaching theme aligned with the supporting body of literature related to the conceptual framework. Kim et al. (2013) found managerial coaching impacted work performance and role clarity that significantly affected employee attitudinal and behavioral responses. Chong et al. (2016) concluded leadership development was the most critical element of managerial coaching.

The performance coaching theme was analogous to McCarthy and Milner's (2013) conclusions that regular managerial coaching might positively influence performance, work engagement, and learning. These findings confirmed previous coaching research by Kim et al. (2013), and McCarthy and Milner (2013). There were

subthemes identified within the second main theme through responses provided by P1-P4, as well as in RetailCo company documents and substantiated by extant literature. As presented in Table 5, the subthemes included, (a) coaching, (b) store manager personal involvement, and (c) reducing role conflict.

Table 5

Frequency of Performance Coaching Subthemes

Subthemes	<i>n</i>	Rate of Occurrence
Coaching	41	17.30%
Store manager personal involvement	15	6.33%
Reducing role conflict	7	2.96%

Coaching. McCarthy and Milner (2013) asserted the importance of managers applying effective coaching skills to achieve performance and organizational goals, yet indicated challenges with managerial coaching without adequate coach preparation and support. The importance of coaching first-line supervisors was evident in store manager and first-line supervisor training checklists. Peng and Lin (2016) found that managers who provided relevant performance feedback might improve overall organizational results, as well as improve subordinate motivation and work performance. Moreover, Peng and Lin (2016) concluded effective supervisory feedback skills reduced deviant behavior by subordinates, and also improved supervisor-employee interpersonal relationships. Conversely, Longenecker and Yonker (2013a) asserted a lack of feedback could inhibit performance, growth, and development of leaders such as first-line

supervisors. As noted in Table 5, participant responses ($n = 41$) and company documents indicated, store managers utilized performance coaching with first-line supervisors, and also equipped the first-line supervisors to use coaching with their subordinates.

Participants specifically addressed the coaching subtheme during interviews:

- “Utilizing a coaching model, along with posted steps, is critical to ensuring store manager’s expectations for coaching, communication, feedback, and recognition are cascaded throughout the store. You must simply take the time to coach and develop first-line supervisors in different ways depending on their generation and learning style.” (P2)
- “When identifying and solving a problem, lay out facts about what you know, then breakdown problems into components, figure out what the root-cause is, and then solve it.” (P3)
- “Express accountability through using a questioning method by questioning the first-line supervisor on what the best approach is to resolve the issue versus providing them with an answer. Coach the first-line supervisor in making a better decision the next time.” (P3)
- “Coaching first-line supervisors is essential, including, coaching on weaknesses, and walking a department [with the first-line supervisor] based on customer feedback, as well as review potential guest (customer) scenarios.” (P4)
- “Teaching first-line supervisors through coaching to plan and prioritize their task plan, as well as make sure they are comfortable with diverse situations that arise - this reduces the potential for them to get overwhelmed and overly stressed.” (P1)

- “Provide feedback on results.” (P2)
- “Visually inspect and observe processes.” (P4)

Store manager personal involvement. McCarthy and Milner (2013) concluded a coaching manager should coach in a manner perceived as authentic and should be self-aware and reflective to minimize potentially ethical issues and role conflict. Chong et al. (2016) found that developing a strong connection based on trust and mutual respect was critical for an effective coaching relationship. Walger, Roglio, and Abib (2016) suggested reflection-in-action increased self-knowledge and contributed to broadened view of organization, as well as individual and organizational learning. The importance of store manager and first-line supervisor personal involvement, as well as the importance of reflection were evident in store manager and first-line supervisor training checklists.

Several studies have suggested the importance of specific management behaviors. Kalargyrou et al. (2012) asserted motivating subordinates, influencing others, and communicating vision of the organization are interpersonal skills focused on interacting with and influencing stakeholders. Iyer and Johlke (2015) suggested managers should model positive customer behavior to influence employees' attitudes and behaviors. McCarthy and Milner (2013) suggested observing behavior and providing feedback were central to all managerial coaching. Participant interview responses ($n = 15$) and company documentation review revealed store manager personal involvement with first-line supervisors. Participants addressed this subtheme:

- “Hands-on involvement by store manager with first-line supervisors is by far the best way to grow knowledge and business. Hands-on involvement is important to

addressing barriers to implement strategies discussed for improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities.” (P4)

- “Store manager’s personal example and situation involvement are important for developing first-line supervisors’ problem-solving abilities. It is important to understand yourself as well in order to work effectively with those who are different from you.” (P2)
- “You just simply take the time to develop first-line supervisors; you support and put the people first, as well as actually work with them” (P4)

Reducing role conflict. Townsend and Russell (2013) suggested that the first-line supervisor role was complex, dichotomous, and faced myriad accountabilities and pressures. Rigopoulou et al. (2012) noted clarifying role accountabilities might improve first-line supervisor motivation and potentially job performance. Kim et al. (2016) concluded subordinates who received managerial coaching had a coherent role understanding and higher level of personal commitment. The significance of reducing role conflict was evident in participant interview responses and the store manager job description, as well as leadership tenants identified in the store manager and first-line supervisor training checklists. Participants mentioned reducing role conflict subtheme in 6.33% of interview responses, notably:

- “Fast-paced environment creates barriers to implementing first-line supervisor problem-solving improvement strategies. Business is ever changing and we get many different things coming down the pipeline on a daily basis (customer [guest] focus, frequent new initiatives, etc.).” (P1)

- “Be prepared to rewind and make adjustments to ensure [first-line supervisors] maintain standards.” (P4)
- “First-line supervisors, as well as store management, must deal with competing demands of everyday workload that affects first-line supervisor effectiveness- we are sidetracked and it can be tough.” (P1)

Theme 3: First-Line Supervisor Learning and Development

The third theme developed from the data was first-line supervisor learning and development. Within this theme, participants discussed the critical elements in first-line supervisor learning and development activities to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. As presented in Table 6, participant interview responses and RetailCo company documents mentioned first-line supervisor learning and development 40 times, or 16.88% of all responses.

Table 6

Frequency of Third Main Theme

Theme	<i>n</i>	Rate of Occurrence
First-line supervisor learning and development	40	16.88%

Company documentation such as store manager and first-line supervisor training checklists, and participant responses, indicated the importance of first-line supervisor on-the-job (training) learning, completing mandated company training programs, as well as the importance of development and action planning. The first-line supervisor learning and development theme aligned with the supporting body of literature related to the

conceptual framework. Findings within the first-line supervisor learning and development theme aligned and diverged from extant literature. Germain (2012) concluded some attributes of expertise are intrinsic and considered unteachable, however, skills, such as problem-solving, social judgment, and knowledge, can be acquired by the learner through training. Conversely, Zaccaro (2012) indicated individual leader attributes, such as motivation orientation, aid in explaining leadership effectiveness. Townsend (2013) concluded organizations and managers often neglected the first-line supervisor role development.

The first-line supervisor learning and development theme paralleled Townsend's (2013) conclusions that formal support and training were critical for first-line supervisor skill development. Townsend (2013) asserted that effective first-line supervisor training might include a training program coupled with managerial coaching. The findings from this theme confirmed previous research by Billett and Choy (2013), and Cohen (2013). Identified subthemes through interview responses (see Table 7), included: (a) on-the-job learning, (b) follow-through on company mandated training, and (c) development and action planning.

Table 7

Frequency of First-Line Supervisor Learning and Development Subthemes

Subthemes	<i>n</i>	Rate of Occurrence
On-the-job learning	12	5.06%
Follow-through on company mandated training	6	2.53%
Development and action planning	22	9.28%

On-the-job learning. Day et al. (2014) concluded leader skill development was dependent on experiential learning that occurred as an individual interacts with the organizational environment. The importance of first-line supervisor on-the-job learning was evident in first-line supervisor training documentation that detailed on-the-job training objectives, practice, and corresponding learning completion tracking. Billett and Choy (2013) suggested on-the-job guided learning is effective in developing procedural, conceptual, and dispositional knowledge. De Meuse et al. (2012) described learning and doing as being inseparable, and leaders' learning activities emerged in response to lessons created by dealing with critical incidents that might include uncertain outcomes, consequences of actions, meaningful opportunities, and problems. Mumford et al. (2000) asserted knowledge acquired through experience and experiential learning was critical in how leaders define problems, evaluate constraints, and implement plans. As indicated in Table 7, participants mentioned the on-the-job learning and development subtheme 12 times in interview responses. Participants specifically addressed first-line supervisor on-the-job learning and development subtheme:

- “Ongoing first-line supervisor development and review are critical to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving skills.” (P1)
- “Effective decision-making and problem solving is a learning process. Teaching first-line supervisors to resolve issues involves consistency and coaching them over a period of time.” (P3)
- “You just simply take the time to develop first-line supervisors; you support and put the people first, as well as actually work with them.” (P4)
- “A store manager must teach first-line supervisors to plan and prioritize their task plan.” (P1)

Follow-through on company mandated training. Preenen et al. (2014)

concluded effective management practices might include setting and executing goals, planning and scheduling activities, and developing subordinates. Store managers should create a supportive environment that facilitates transfer and application of formal training programs by subordinates, including first-line supervisors (Lancaster, 2013). RetailCo training documents that included tracking completion, provided evidence of the importance of following-through, and completing training activities by first-line supervisors. Participants mentioned follow-through on company mandated training subtheme six times (2.53% of all responses) in interview responses as indicated in Table 7. Participants provided feedback within the subtheme:

- “Store managers should bring training back to store and train first-line supervisors.” (P1)

- “Utilize company training documentation; ensure completion of company-provided training, and demonstration of learning.” (P4)
- “Training first-line supervisors is central to implementing strategies.” (P1)

Development and action planning. Longenecker and Yonker (2013b) asserted that organizational leaders, such as store managers, should create development and action planning systems to aid in closing performance gaps of subordinate leaders, including first-line supervisors. Longenecker and Yonker (2013b) concluded leaders should create a personalized development plan to address identified deficiencies and improve performance. Information contained in store manager and first-line supervisor training checklists and RetailCo training documents elaborated on the importance of establishing and executing development plans and learning for, and by, first-line supervisors. Longenecker and Yonker (2013b) suggested development plans should include regular feedback and review cycles to ensure accountability and progress versus plan. Day et al. (2014) found leaders should tailor learning and training assignments to current developmental needs. Billett and Choy (2013) asserted workplace learning should be designed with formal practices designed to effectively engage and support learners in the workplace. However, Billett and Choy (2013) indicated some basic prerequisites were better suited for learning outside the workplace prior to engaging in guided or other types of learning in the workplace. As presented in Table 7, participants mentioned development and action planning subtheme 22 times in interview responses. All participants expressed insights related to the development and action planning subtheme:

- “Create and work a development (action) plan for each first-line supervisor . . . challenge them on their weaknesses and guide improvement.” (P2)
- “The store manager should implement unique strategies (action plans) for each first-line supervisor based on individual needs.” (P3)
- “Create and work a development (action) plan for each first-line supervisor with frequent follow-up on the development (action) plan.” (P4)
- “Planning [development], as well as make sure they are comfortable with diverse situations that arise.” (P1)
- “Structured training courses outside the store work environment should be utilized to skill-build first-line supervisor problem-solving skills.” (P4)

Theme 4: Measuring Performance

The fourth and final main theme that developed from the data was measuring first-line supervisor performance. In discussing this theme, participants identified strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities through measuring and reviewing first-line supervisors’ performance. Furthermore, RetailCo annual goal setting template indicated the importance of identifying and establishing diverse performance goals and measurements for first-line supervisors. Table 8 reflected participant interview responses and RetailCo documents mentioned measuring performance 31 times, or 13.08% of all responses.

Table 8

Frequency of Fourth Main Theme

Theme	<i>n</i>	Rate of Occurrence
Measuring performance	31	13.08%

The measuring performance theme aligned with the body of literature, RetailCo company documents, and related to the skills-based leadership model. Key constructs of the skills-based leadership model included demonstrated performance as a component of leadership outcomes (Mumford et al., 2000; Northouse, 2013). As previously noted, Bloom et al. (2012) indicated effective management performance and practices could positively improve organizational performance. Preenen et al. (2014) found effective management practices might include setting and executing goals, planning and scheduling activities, and developing subordinates.

The measuring performance theme paralleled Hoffman and Lord's (2013) conclusions suggesting the importance of analyzing leadership performance at an event-level to aid in understanding, in part, how leaders, such as first-line supervisors, acquire leadership skills. Responses provided by all participants, RetailCo company documents, and the body of literature aided in identifying subthemes within the fourth main theme. As indicated in Table 9, the subthemes included, (a) identify performance measurements, (b) set performance goals, and (c) regularly review performance.

Table 9

Frequency of Measuring Performance Subthemes

Subthemes	<i>n</i>	Rate of Occurrence
Identify performance measurements	12	5.06%
Set performance goals	11	4.64%
Regularly review performance	8	3.38%

Identify performance measurements. Armstrong and Taylor (2014) suggested performance management was a method of obtaining better results through providing a framework to establish a shared understanding of what and how outcomes should be achieved. Taticchi, Balachandran, and Tonelli (2012) indicated a performance measurement and monitoring (PMM) system should define what to analyze, how to process findings, and how to translate information from the findings to enable managerial actions and create value. RetailCo annual goal setting template identified categories and definitions of performance goals and measurements store managers utilized in establishing a PMM for first-line supervisors. Participants mentioned identify performance measurements subtheme 12 times (5.06% of all responses) in interview responses as indicated in Table 7. Participants provided feedback that addressed the subtheme:

- “To measure the effectiveness of strategies, a store manager should provide first-line supervisors with expectations to enable them put practices in place based on customer, financial, and employee feedback.” (P2)

- “Establish performance guidelines, targets to monitor and communicate results. [Metrics] should measure P&L results, demonstrated brand differentiation behavior, and customer feedback.” (P1)
- “Measure the effectiveness of strategies through conversations with first-line supervisors about making decisions. Demonstrated behavior and observations of those behaviors demonstrated by first-line supervisors provides evidence of effective decision-making and problem solving.” (P3)

Set performance goals. Hamrin (2016) suggested clarifying goals and actively monitoring performance were effective leadership communication behaviors. Price (2015) indicated first-line supervisors are responsible for delivering against key performance indicators (KPIs) to achieve budgeted operational targets. Information contained in store manager and first-line supervisor training checklists and RetailCo training documents identified the importance of setting first-line supervisor performance goals. Hezlett (2016) concluded experience-driven leadership development include goal setting and ongoing monitoring. As noted in Table 9, participant responses ($n = 11$) and company documents indicated, store managers utilized goal setting with first-line supervisors, as well as set the expectation for first-line supervisors to set goals with their respective subordinates. Participants specifically addressed the goal setting subtheme during interviews:

- “Set performance goals and action planning based on facts.” (P2)
- “Establish performance guidelines, targets for first-line supervisors in the form of stretch goals.” (P1)

- “Set performance goals.” (P4)

Regularly review performance. Armstrong and Taylor (2014) asserted reviewing performance against expectations at regular intervals might contribute to overall performance and development improvements. Furthermore, McCarthy and Milner (2016) indicated reviews of performance goals should occur on an ongoing basis. Findings of this study indicate reviewing performance is a type of communication and feedback process between store managers and first-line supervisors and supports Peng and Lin’s (2016) suggestion that frequent dyadic performance review might improve organizational performance.

The importance of regularly reviewing first-line supervisor performance was evident in store manager and first-line supervisor training checklists, RetailCo annual goal setting template and training documentation. Participants mentioned the regularly review performance with first-line supervisor subtheme eight times (3.38% of all responses) in interview responses as indicated in Table 9. Several participant statements illustrated this subtheme:

- “Regularly scheduled reviews with first-line supervisors.” (P1)
- “Review and assess actions with first-line supervisors. Review performance at regular intervals (30-day performance plan for P&L and mystery shops, for example).” (P2)
- “Review performance with first-line supervisors at regular intervals.” (P4)

Summary

The research findings were congruent with the purpose and significance of the study and related to the skills-based leadership model. The main themes that emerged, as presented in Tables 2, 4, 6, and 8, addressed the central research question and played a critical role in helping to understand the research phenomenon. This study has contributed to the understanding of strategies retail store managers need to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. According to Meuser et al. (2016), leadership event cycles might explain linkages between dynamic leadership processes and person-parts level of events as posited by Hoffman and Lord (2013). Furthermore, Hoffman and Lord (2013) asserted that developing proactive leadership skills in creating and responding to events is necessary to provide consistency, predictability, and structure for followers, and to also contribute to discerning a leader's impact on organizational performance. Therefore, when there are no strategies in place to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities, retail store managers may have a greater challenge in achieving customer satisfaction and better business results.

Applications to Professional Practice

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies retail supermarket store managers use to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities. Based on the research question, analysis of interviews responses, analysis and review of company documents, as well as reflexive journaling, I identified four main themes in Section 3. The four main themes included: (a) communicating expectations with first-line

supervisors, (b) coaching first-line supervisors on performance, (c) first-line supervisor learning and development, and (d) measuring first-line supervisor performance.

This research is meaningful to retail supermarket store managers in numerous ways. Townsend, Loudoun, and Troth (2016) concluded first-line supervisors encounter barriers and constraints in their roles related to dichotomous managerial and leadership accountabilities. The findings of this study are relative the skills-based leadership model and indicated leadership is a type of skilled performance (Mumford et al., 2000; Price, 2015). The implementation of strategies identified in the first main theme by P1, P2, P3, and P4, such as communicating and cascading expectations, holding first-line supervisors accountable, following up, and providing positive reinforcement, are leader communication competencies (Steele & Plenty, 2015). Having these strategies in place may assist retail supermarket store managers in improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities related to communication, accountability, setting and clarifying expectations, following-up on expected performance, and enabling first-line supervisor performance and handling mistakes.

Improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities requires strategies for coaching first-line supervisor in key factors. McCarthy and Milner (2013) concluded that regular managerial coaching might positively influence performance, work engagement, and learning. In the second main theme, P2 and P3 related utilizing a situational coaching approach adjusted to each first-line supervisor. P3 articulated questioning approach to coaching that centered responsibility for problem-solving on the first-line supervisor. Reducing first-line supervisor role conflict was critical, as expressed by P1 and P4, and

were also supported by company documentation. Kim et al. (2016) concluded subordinates who received managerial coaching had a coherent role understanding and higher level of personal commitment. Store managers can implement myriad learning and development activities expressed by P1, P2, and P4, to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving skills. Longenecker and Yonker (2013b) asserted that organizational leaders, such as store managers, should create development and action planning systems to aid in closing performance gaps of subordinate leaders, including first-line supervisors. The measuring performance theme was evident in P1's statements, which may aid in establishing a performance measurement and management system for first-line supervisors. Hoffman and Lord (2013) suggested the importance of analyzing leadership performance at an event-level to aid in understanding, in part, how leaders, such as first-line supervisors, acquire leadership skills.

Implications for Social Change

I found the following strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities that included communicating expectations, performance coaching, and first-line supervisor learning and development. Adoption of these strategies may contribute to social change by influencing first-line supervisors in conflict leadership and management leading to improvement in employee engagement (Soieb et al., 2013), as well as address differing socialization needs of subordinates (Tang et al., 2014). Furthermore, these strategies may help retail store managers improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities to enhance employee well-being through effective and flexible workplaces. Effective and flexible workplaces improve employee and family well-being,

address community and societal issues associated with workforce-workplace mismatch while improving employer outcomes (Galinsky, Matos, & Sakai-O'Neill, 2013).

First-line supervisor learning and development strategies may have a positive effect on implementation of organizational business, social, and sustainability initiatives. Sharma and Good (2013) suggested management training and development programs might improve first-line supervisor capabilities associated with balancing social initiatives and profitability goals. Additionally, Hong, Liao, Hu, and Jiang (2013) concluded management training and development programs might improve first-line supervisor skills associated with service orientation. Improved first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities may enable first-line supervisors to implement social change initiatives, such as workplace flexibility, that improve employees' lives, positively impact communities, and improve organizational performance.

Recommendations for Action

Retail supermarket store managers, human resources & organizational development (HROD) leaders, and senior leaders may consider evaluating their strategies against the strategies identified in the four main themes. Townsend and Russell (2013) found first-line supervisors face myriad pressures including managing human resources policies, managing budgets, staff development and communication, people management, and customer interaction. Furthermore, Townsend (2013) asserted that in many respects organizations have neglected to develop the first-line supervisor role. If strategies do not exist within an organization, managers should work with HROD leaders to develop the most effective strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities that

align with business goals. If company leaders decide to implement strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities, they should consider budgeting and allocate funding to support these strategies.

Findings from this study are important to retail store managers, HROD leaders, and senior organizational leaders. The application of effective strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities may provide company leaders with methods to improve customer satisfaction, as well as improve company performance. I will disseminate the results of this study through scholarly journals, business journals, conferences, and affinity share groups. Furthermore, I will circulate the results of this study through consulting and training engagements regarding first-line supervisor and new leader skills development.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings from this study warrant additional exploration of strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem solving abilities as they apply to the broader topic of first-line supervisor leadership skills for which exists dearth literature (Townsend et al., 2016). Therefore, researchers should conduct further studies to explore and address limitations and delimitations. Since this study focused on four retail store managers from one company in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, I recommend expanding research to include broader geographical scope. I further recommend exploration of strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities with larger organizations, as well as examining variables identified within this study from a quantitative research worldview and perspective.

I also suggest conducting a study to expand examination of strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities through the lens of elements of the events taxonomy (Hoffman & Lord, 2013). Exploring strategies from events-level and person-parts perspectives might provide further elaboration of findings from this study. I further suggest conducting a study to investigate the financial impact of implementing strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities on organizational profitability.

Reflections

While progressing through the research process, I developed a deeper understanding and appreciation for doctoral level research. Through the data collection process, I realized the benefits and importance of reflexive journaling. I found from the first semistructured interview the difficulty in not interjecting statements based on my own personal biases related to improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. Reflexive journaling provided the opportunity to analyze each interview, address potential biases, and to also plan for future interviews.

The findings of this study affect me personally as a human capital consultant focusing on the retail industry. The findings of the study aligned with what I have experienced in working with organizations, and specifically store teams, to improve leadership skills of store and first-line supervisors. The findings from this study exposed me to additional strategies, processes, and practices I can use in leadership development efforts.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to explore strategies retail store managers used to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. I used a qualitative single case study to understand the phenomenon under study. The findings of the study show that organizational leaders can use the skills-based leadership model conceptual framework to enhance an organization's performance.

I developed interview questions and utilized an interview protocol to elicit responses from participants based on their experiences as retail supermarket store managers who had implemented strategies for improving first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. The participants, purposefully selected from RetailCo's Winston-Salem, NC area stores, had experience implementing strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. I used MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software to store, organize, sort, and aid in coding data. During the analysis, I coded significant statements and established four themes that provided insight into strategies retail store managers used to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities.

The central research question was "What strategies do retail supermarket managers use to improve first-line supervisors' problem solving abilities?" The findings of the study as summarized by four main themes provided adequate answers to the problem.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

You are invited to take part in a research study about exploring and understanding strategies retail supermarket store managers use to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. The researcher is inviting *retail supermarket store managers, who are over 18 years of age, and have experience implementing strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving skills* to be in the study. I obtained your name/contact info via Doctor [Name Masked], SVP of Human Resources, RetailCo, Inc. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named John E. Jarvis, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand strategies retail store managers utilize to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Respond to a series of questions presented by the researcher during a 60 minute time frame via in-person interview;
- Permit the researcher to record your voice;
- Review a synthesis of your responses by the researcher for accuracy and make corrections during a 15-20 minute time frame via in-person member checking session;
- Review a revised synthesis of your responses by the researcher for accuracy and make any additional corrections via email or telephone during a 15 minute time frame. This step will repeat as necessary to assure an accurate synthesis of your responses.

Here are some sample questions:

- What strategies have you utilized to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities related to customer satisfaction?
- How did you implement the strategies?
- What barriers did you have to address in implementing the strategies?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at RetailCo, Inc., or RetailCo. Llp, will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as fatigue and stress. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing

Benefits of being in this study may include contributing to results that may provide retail store managers with strategies to improve first-line supervisory problem-solving abilities to positively impact employee performance, customer satisfaction, and organizational performance.

Payment:

There is no payment as part of participating in this study, however, participants will receive a 1 to 2 page summary of results for this study.

Privacy:

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by by backing-up electronic/digital data to a password protected flash drive and locking hard copy data and flash drive in a filing cabinet. Additionally, to further protect personal information codes will be used in place of names in the study (e.g. *John Doe will be coded as P1, etc.*)., participant names will be stored separately from the data. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via phone number 336-469-3528 and/or email address john.jarvis@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is **07-18-16-0525889** and it expires on **July 17, 2017.**

Please print or save this consent form for your records.

Obtaining Your Consent

If you feel you understand the study well enough to make a decision about it, please indicate your consent by replying to this email with the words, "I consent."

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Interview	
What to Do	What to Say
Start interview protocol	-
Establish Rapport- Introduce myself and the topic under study.	My name is John Jarvis and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I would like to thank you for your time and for granting me this interview. The primary research goals are: (a) to explore strategies used by retail store managers to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities, (b) to identify common themes from participants on the topic.
Explain content of the consent form and address any concerns the participant may have.	On [Date] you received a consent form via mail containing some legal and ethical requirements. On [Date] you replied granting me the consent for this interview. Are there any concerns that you may want to address before we proceed?
Receive consent to start interview.	We will proceed in case I have your consent.
Start audio recording.	I will now start the audio recordings.
Introduce participant with code, the date, and time.	Interview with Participant [1..4] , Case Organization [RetailCo], [Current Date], and [Current Time]
Start interview with the initial probe question, followed by the targeted concept questions, targeted follow-up questions, and ending with the wrap-up question respectively.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What strategies have you utilized to improve first-line supervisor problem solving abilities related to customer satisfaction? 2. How did you implement the strategies? 3. What barriers did you have to address in implementing the strategies? 4. How did you address the barriers to implementing the strategies? 5. How do you measure the strategies' efficacy (or effectiveness)? 6. Please share additional information related to strategies store managers use to improve first line supervisor problem-solving skills that will add value to this study?

End interview section and discuss member-checking with participant	I would like to thank you for your time and information provided. As explained in the consent form this interview will be de-identified using your code [Participant X] and transcribed verbatim. You will get the opportunity during a follow-up member-checking interview to check whether the interview was correctly synthesized and interpreted.
Schedule follow-up member checking interview	I will email you the transcript on [Date] and would like to schedule the follow-up interview on [Date].
Record reflective notes	Record and summarize interview observations, notes, and reflections in reflexive journal.
End interview protocol	

Follow-up Member Checking Interview

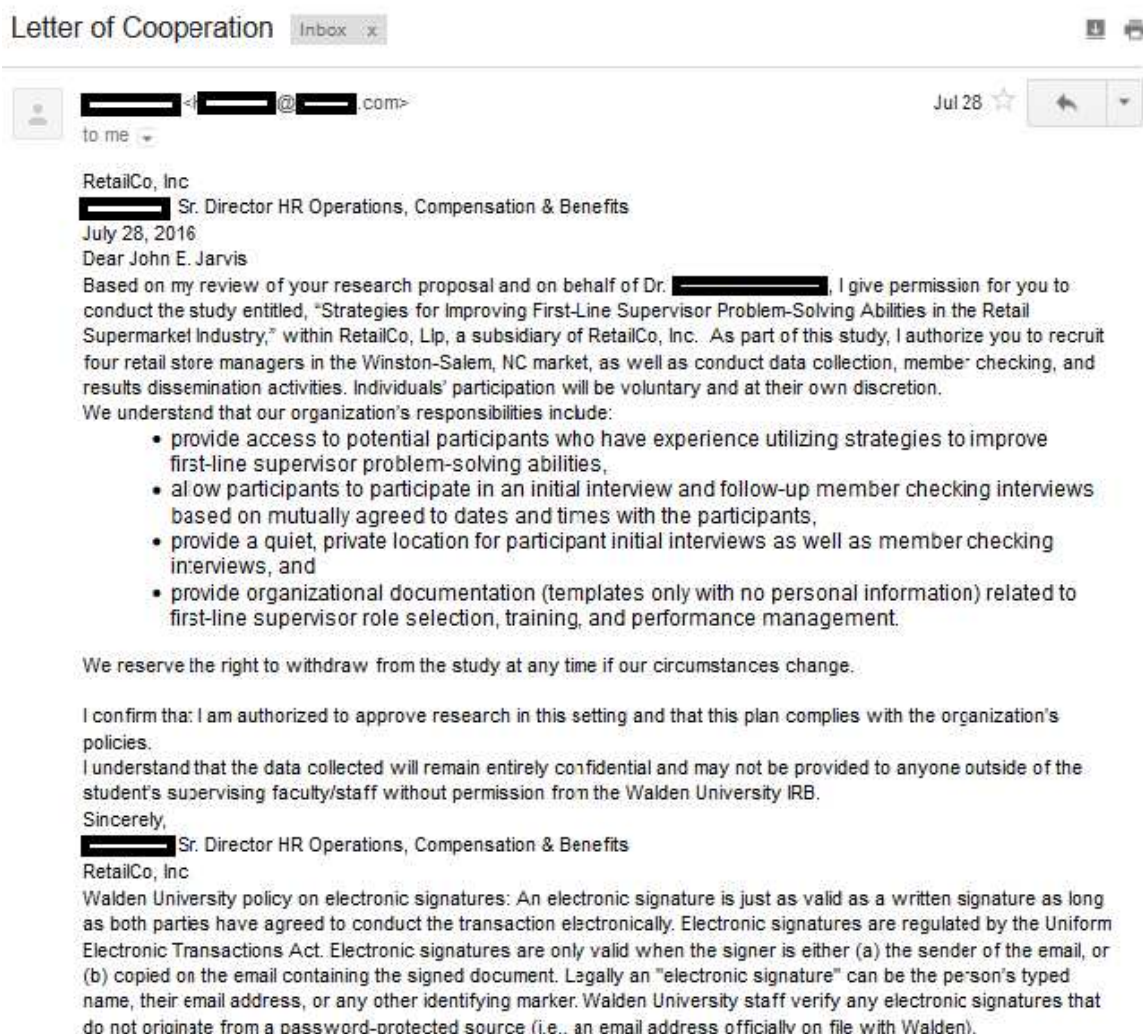
Start follow-up member checking interview protocol	-
Introduce the follow-up member-checking interview.	I would like to thank you for your time and for granting me this follow-up interview. The purpose of this interview is to check if my interpretations of the answers to the questions we addressed during the interview on [Date] accurately reflect what you intended to describe and discuss. Additionally, I want address some additional questions I have.
Present a concise synthesis of the interpretation of each of the interview questions and ask some additional probing questions related to the data collected. Ask questions until the point of data saturation.	<p>[Concise synthesis of the interpretation of each of the research interview questions].</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. [Additional probing question]. 2. [Additional probing question]. 3. .. 4. .. 5. ..
End member-checking interview section and discuss member-checking via email with participant	I would like to thank you for your time and information provided. As explained in the consent form this interview will be de-identified using your code [Participant X] and transcribed verbatim. You will get the opportunity during a follow-up member-checking email interview to check whether the interview was correctly synthesized and interpreted.

Schedule follow-up member checking email interview	I will email you the transcript on [Date] and would like to schedule the follow-up interview on [Date].
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Record reflective notes	Record and summarize interview observations, notes, and reflections in reflexive journal.
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End follow-up member checking interview protocol	
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Appendix C: Letter of Cooperation



Appendix D: Invitation to Participate in Research

Potential Participant Invitation to Participate in Research

Company [Mask with RetailCo]
Person and Title

Month DD, 2016

Dear [Potential Participant]

You are invited to take part in a research study about exploring and understanding strategies retail supermarket store managers use to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving abilities. The researcher is inviting retail supermarket store managers, who are over 18 years of age, and have experience implementing strategies to improve first-line supervisor problem-solving skills to be in the study.

I obtained your name and contact information via Doctor Robert Vipperman, SVP of Human Resources, RetailCo, Inc. You were identified as a potential participant who can share valuable experience and insight related to the topic under study. Participation in this research is voluntary and should you consent to participate, you can withdraw consent at any time.

I have attached a form that provides important details about my research project. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

If you consent to participate, please respond to my email with “I consent to participate.” I will contact you via a phone call to set up a date and time for an interview as well as answer any questions you might have pertaining to this research project as well as any concerns you might have.

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you.

With Kind Regards,

John E. Jarvis
Doctoral Student, Walden University
336.469.3528 cell

Walden University policy on electronic signatures: An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically. Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic

Transactions Act. Electronic signatures are only valid when the signer is either (a) the sender of the email, or (b) copied on the email containing the signed document. Legally an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. Walden University staff verify any electronic signatures that do not originate from a password-protected source (i.e., an email address officially on file with Walden).